



THE
CODE BREAKERS
SERIES

A Secret Code

JACKI
DELECKI

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A Secret Code

The Code Breakers Regency Romantic Suspense Series
Book 11

Jacki Delecki

About the Book

Enter the emotional, suspenseful Regency world of USA Today bestselling author Jacki Delecki's Code Breakers spy series. Undaunted by danger or scandal, these intrepid lords and ladies discover true love as they risk it all to save England from Napoleon's treacherous designs.

Two Unattainable Missions

Joie and Reggie are back. And while it's no secret they are in love, convincing her father that the titleless Reggie will be a good husband is a failed mission—at least so far. However, they won't give up. Joie must return to London for her first season, pretending to accept her fate, that her father has picked an eligible man for Joie to wed. Help will come in the form of Lady Henrietta, who has personally assumed the task of sponsoring Joie to stifle any scandal and to help make the match with Reggie work.

And only one is on assignment from the Crown.

Reggie is in London, tasked with finding the mole inside the head code breaker's household. Joie immediately tries to help Reggie with his assignment by befriending Lady Henrietta's uncle who is a codebreaker—and fraternizing with the servants in effort to find the spy, despite Reggie telling her not to interfere this time. But when Joie discovers how the mole is sending the messages to France, the enemy must retaliate. But this time, she's not the target. She's jeopardized someone else.

Who will live and who will die? And will Reggie and Joie ever be able to wed?

Copyright

A Secret Code

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Excerpt from **Mission: Impossible to Resist** © 2018 by Jacki Delecki

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Excerpt from A CODE OF JOY

Excerpt from MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE TO RESIST

Also by Jacki Delecki

About the Author

Dedication

To Luna, our newest canine family member. A rambunctious Sato—a Puerto Rican street dog who soon will make appearances in my books. And to Gus and Talley who were incredible companions and continue to inspire my characters by their steadfast devotion.

Chapter One

Lieutenant Reginald Talley paced in front of the door. Anticipating a less than warm reception, his heart pounded against his chest like cannon fire. He felt greater trepidation about this meeting than he'd ever felt charging into battle. He had never before asked for a woman's hand. And this was not just any woman, but the esteemed Archbishop George Henry James's only daughter.

From a lifetime of contending with his father, "the General," Reggie had acquired practice in standing up to powerful men. He had developed superb negotiating skills with explanations always at the ready.

Except for the time he had been sent down from Oxford for bringing sheep into his older brother's rooms, he had been quite adept at defending himself. His justification at the time—that his older brother had been a royal pain—had proven inadequate. This time, he had no argument except his love for Joie and Joie's love for him. And the archbishop wouldn't be swayed by Reggie's or Joie's feelings when Reggie was not a titled gentleman, despite his large inheritance and lands. His Grace valued one's standing in society above all else.

Reggie planned to be a buffer between Joie and her disapproving father. After years of not caving under the general's bullying, Reggie knew how to protect Joie from unwanted censure.

A skinny man with a prominent Adam's apple and a gray-streaked widow's peak opened the office door. His dark morning coat drooped on his narrow shoulders. "His Grace will see you now."

Reggie nodded to the man who held the door as he entered the spacious room lined with red velvet drapes and ornate dark wood. A carved mahogany pulpit stood next to the rows of books stacked from floor to ceiling. Reggie expected the smell of burning incense in preparation for services. The office recalled the chapel at Oxford and all the painful hours spent on wooden benches listening to boring sermons.

The archbishop didn't stand or acknowledge Reggie's arrival but continued to browse the papers on his desk.

"Your Grace." Reggie bowed his head before moving into

the dark and heavily furnished room.

With his strong forehead, broad nose, and beady eyes, the archbishop bore no resemblance to his daughter. Joie, who had expressive black eyes, thick hair the color of crow's wings, and porcelain skin, must have inherited her beauty from her mother.

"I appreciate you taking time to see me, sir. I'm sure your schedule is quite demanding."

"Lieutenant Talley?"

"Yes, sir." Reggie, in his full regalia, held a military stance, his feet planted apart, his shoulders back, and his chin tucked in. The archbishop raised a contemptuous eyebrow as his gaze traveled over him, but it failed to disturb Reggie as the archbishop no doubt hoped. A man of the cloth who spent his life studying and working with the clergy wasn't the least bit intimidating to Reggie. He had withstood years of censorious perusal by his father and then other high-ranking military men hardened by war. Yet the importance of pleasing this austere figure wasn't lost on Reggie. This was the man who held Joie's happiness in his hands.

"My daughter hasn't stopped singing your praises since she's arrived in London." Disdain laced his deep baritone voice. The man, a trained orator, pitched his voice perfectly for cutting effect. Reggie didn't care if the archbishop didn't like him, but he was insulted on Joie's behalf. Her father should appreciate how rare his sensitive and insightful daughter was among women.

Reggie approached the desk, forcing the man to look up at him—a trick Reggie had learned from all the dressing downs before the general.

The archbishop waved his hand toward a chair. Reggie resisted being positioned like a penitent and sitting across the imposing desk with Joie's father looking down at him from his seat of power, a high-backed chair with intricate scrollwork.

"As you are aware, the circumstances of meeting your daughter were unusual, sir." He wouldn't mention the scandalous manner in which he mistook an archbishop's daughter for a French spy and the mistress of Jerome Bonaparte. Confusing Joie for his contact on his first clandestine mission hadn't been the best beginning of his career in British intelligence.

"Joie was on her way to her aunt as punishment for her scandalous behavior during the pre-Christmas season. Instead of returning home chastised, she returned from her sojourn in the

country in love with a soldier. A soldier she hadn't been properly introduced to but encountered at a public inn."

Her father framed their meeting in the worst possible way. Anger blistered under Reggie's skin and crawled into his gut. There was nothing untoward or sordid about the immediate connection between them. How dare he treat an innocent and trusting Joie in such a condemning fashion? Again, her father saw only the worst. Instead of defending his daughter for innocently believing a hardened London dissolute who tried to seduce her at a ball, her father had held her responsible.

"Miss James is blameless. She did nothing scandalous when she was in London. She trusted a dishonorable man parading as a gentleman."

"Except there was gossip about her and nothing of the gentleman. She understands that she must show the most refined behavior now that she is rejoining the season. She has already acquired notoriety for her lack of judgment. I promised my wife on her deathbed that Joie would enjoy all the delights of the season and make a match with a respected, titled gentleman. I will not have my daughter's name bandied about because of questionable indiscretions during travel."

Reggie didn't want to contemplate her father's reaction if he learned of Joie caring for Reggie after he had been shot by the French spies who had kidnapped her.

"Sir... You do both Miss James and me a disservice."

"I'm relieved that no rumors have made their way to London about her behavior in Rye."

Of course, there was nothing out in society. Information about a British intelligence agent capturing French spies and involving an innocent woman would remain a protected secret.

"Miss James acted in a most discreet manner befitting her station during her forced stay. She had no control over the weather or her carriage's broken axle. There was nothing in her behavior that would warrant censure from society or yourself."

Reggie's thoughts flashed on their passionate kisses and kept his reactions hidden.

"If you've come to ask permission to court my daughter, the answer is no. You are not worthy of my daughter and never will be."

Reggie thought he had been prepared for the rejection. But

he felt the familiar stab to his gut and the sting of recrimination. It was reminiscent of his childhood when he could never measure up to his father's impossible standards.

"Sir, I agree that I'm not worthy. She is a beautiful, loving woman, and I'm not sure how the fates were in my favor. But I'm an honorable man who serves His Majesty."

"I'll allow that you make a dashing figure in your uniform."

Reggie now regretted that he had chosen to wear his uniform to impress the archbishop with his service to Crown and country.

"And like any flighty young woman, Joie believes she is in love with you. With the death of her mother, she had no one to guide her while going into society. Or to urge her to keep in mind a match befitting my station."

"I know that Miss James misses her mother deeply. And wishes her mother were here for her debut in society."

Did the archbishop's eyes soften at the mention of his wife? According to Joie, theirs was a love match, but since his wife's death the archbishop had turned into a hard and unbending man.

"Surely, your wife would have wanted Joie's happiness with a man who will be devoted to her and will protect her against the harshness of life. I'm a wealthy man with an extensive estate. I can provide for Miss James's future."

"And how do you defend your reputation, sir? You're known in society for your dalliances with opera dancers."

Reggie shifted in the chair. Heat burned up his neck to the tops of his ears. He hadn't expected the archbishop's knowledge of his past.

"Surely you aren't surprised that I would investigate a man that my only daughter believes herself in love with. I'm sure you're capable of finding a woman who needs to marry to increase her family's coffers. But that isn't the case for Joie. She has a large dowry and is in no need of a wealthy man to provide for her. What she needs is to take up her position in society as befitting her rank as my daughter."

"My family is respectable, and I doubt anyone in society would feel the match less than worthy."

"I'm aware of your estate and your family's position in society. It is not enough. I've bigger ambitions for my daughter's future."

Reggie was glad his military discipline prevented him from lashing out. What did the archbishop's ambitions matter? Reggie despised the fact that Joie's happiness was not considered.

"And if you're ever a father, would you want your daughter to marry a man with your reputation? Does my daughter know of your past?"

"I fully understand your reservations. I've had my share of indiscretions as any single man befitting my age and station. Yet, it is all in the past now that I've met Joie. I vow to love and cherish your daughter. I will honor my wedding vows as I do my vow to my country if that is your concern. I have a loving mother and four sisters, and I esteem their feelings and would never want Joie to suffer one moment of pain."

"Very moving speech. As the third son, you might have considered the clergy instead of the military. Neither your wishes nor Joie's play any role in my decision. Joie will marry the Honorable Mr. Landry, a dear childhood friend of Joie's and someone she holds in great esteem. There has been an agreement between our families since they were children."

Reggie snapped his head back as if he received a face plant. Why hadn't Joie told him of Landry? He was acquainted with the second son of an earl, who was a theological scholar making his reputation in the church. Joie had never mentioned an agreement.

"I can see by your reaction that Joie didn't disclose her close relationship with Albert."

Reggie's burst of intense jealousy swept over him like breakers on the Channel's shores. It was true that they hadn't a great deal of time to talk during their stay in Rye. Once the damaged axle had been repaired, Joie had traveled to her aunt's, and he had returned to London to heal and take up his next mission.

And now he regretted that he hadn't told Joie of his plans to meet with the archbishop before her return to London. He wanted Joie to be assured that his intentions and promises in Rye were honorable. And he admitted he wanted society, especially the male contingency, to know that Joie belonged to him before the season started.

He was also afraid if she learned of his visit, she would try to plead his case and possibly make the situation worse if she mentioned anything that had passed between them in Rye. A

prideful man like the archbishop wouldn't want his hand forced if he learned the truth of their kisses and her time caring for him alone in his room.

"I'm surprised that Miss James didn't share her relationship with Mr. Landry, but I believe it must be that she doesn't have the same expectations as you do," Reggie said. "I will honor the lady's wishes if she believes that Mr. Landry will bring her the happiness and contentment she deserves." *Over my dead body*, he thought.

Reggie stood. "I thank you for your time, Your Grace."

Like every good soldier, Reggie knew when to retreat from a skirmish. He planned to win the battle.

Chapter Two

Joie's stomach was aflutter like a swarm of butterflies around a buddleia bush. She was both nervously excited and extremely curious about the invitation to join Lady Henrietta Rathbourne for tea. Joie, wearing a violet spring walking dress, curtsied to the woman who had almost cost Joie and Reggie their lives.

This petite woman, dressed in a simple green gown with her chestnut hair in an unadorned chignon, didn't look like a woman that French spies were willing to kidnap or kill. Whatever role the lady played, it must be vital to England's war against France.

"Miss James, I'm pleased to finally meet you after all the 'excitement' I caused you and Lieutenant Talley."

Joie was at a loss on how to respond. Being kidnapped and held ransom could be called exciting if you didn't mind being terrified out of your wits. Joie had no idea why this tiny woman was the center of intrigue. No one deemed it necessary for Joie to be made privy to Lady Rathbourne's role in English intelligence.

A striking woman in a frothy crimson morning gown was stretched across the settee.

"I would rise to greet you, but it would take your entire visit for me to get upright." The lady's laugh was husky and enchanting.

"And this is my sister-in-law, the Viscountess Gwyneth Ashworth."

Joie curtsied and tried not to stare at Lady Ashworth. By the size of her bulging stomach, she had to be close to delivery or having a very large baby. Her condition usually would preclude a lady venturing out of her home. And Joie remembered that the lady's husband had been in charge of Reggie's mission in Rye.

"I couldn't miss the opportunity to meet you, Miss James, since I'm afraid that I soon won't be able to visit my dear friend." She tenderly rubbed her abdomen. "My husband shared how you became embroiled in danger because of a case of mistaken identity."

Reggie mistaking her for the French spy wasn't the reason Joie had been kidnapped. He had quickly corrected his mistake and had warned her not to get involved. But Joie's need to help Reggie

and her jealousy of the beautiful French spy who had offered to be a double agent—before they realized her intention to be a triple agent—had caused Joie to fall into the wicked woman’s trap. It was Joie’s fault that she had been kidnapped, giving the French the opportunity to exchange Joie for Reggie and his knowledge of Lady Henrietta’s mysterious work.

“I immediately felt we were kindred spirits when my husband related that, after being rescued, you didn’t have a fit of vapors. Instead, you asked my husband if you could become a secret agent.”

Joie couldn’t think of a suitable response. She had been instructed by the viscountess’s husband that she must never mention anything to anyone of what had occurred in Rye because of national security.

The lady’s wide grin helped reassure Joie that she was sincere and not critical of Joie’s actions. Joie didn’t know what a lady’s response should be after being kidnapped, but the sticklers of the ton definitely would consider the need to fight back not at all fitting of a lady of sensitive sensibilities. Joie begged the viscount to be of service after witnessing the evil of the French and their strategy of using women to infiltrate the fabric of British society.

“Your husband’s only response to my request was that I should meet you.” Joie smiled at the viscountess, whose darkest of eyes gleamed with mischief.

“Yes, someday I’ll have to tell you about how I helped my husband in his work. Ash, of course, refuses to allow me to be involved now that I’m...” She patted her abdomen.

“You helped Lord Ashworth? I want to help Reggie. I mean Lieutenant Talley. I had hoped that your husband would assign me to work with the lieutenant. Both men refused to believe I could be of any help. I’m very observant, and people easily trust me.”

Lady Henrietta seated herself and then gestured to a lady’s chair across from her and the settee. On the table was a tray filled with an assortment of rich cakes, sandwiches, cheeses, meats, and fruit.

“May I serve you?” The lady leaned forward and lifted the teapot. “Gwyneth was feeling a bit peckish this morning, so I’ve already made her a plate.”

Lady Gwyneth shifted on the settee, rearranging the pillow under her feet. “I can only eat small amounts. It grows quite

tedious, except for Ash tempting me with morsels. It would be all quite diverting if Ash weren't so worried..."

Joie lowered her gaze when Lady Gwyneth's eyes filled with tears.

"I was never one to cry, but now I burst into tears at regular intervals." She pulled a handkerchief from her lacy sleeve and dabbed at her eyes.

Joie was used to talking with her father's parishioners and the servants about such private matters. But in the lofty homes, there were rules concerning ladies and their confinements, and no one acknowledged or discussed the lady's condition.

Lady Henrietta handed Joie a teacup and then filled a small plate for her. "I wanted to offer my deepest apologies. What you have suffered on my account... And without anyone to share what happened. I know that you've been instructed never to discuss the details, but I worry that you may be suffering deleterious effects. Are you experiencing nightmares?"

Joie hadn't slept well since leaving Rye. Not because of the kidnapping. During the time she was held by the French, she had been frightened, but she'd never doubted Reggie would rescue her. She hadn't slept because of her three-month separation from Reggie without the ability to communicate. She suffered not knowing how he was faring with his injury and his newest assignment. Despite his injury, Reggie had to return to London to find the mole in the Rathbourne household. Someone had leaked knowledge of Lady Henrietta's work to the French.

"But my lady, it wasn't your fault. It was an unusual circumstance." Joie hesitated, uncertain of what she should share. Given this opportunity, she wanted to make certain that the women would tell their husbands that Joie was at fault and no blame should be placed on Reggie.

"But you were an innocent stranded for Christmas and swept into Lieutenant Talley's dangerous mission," Lady Henrietta said.

"Meeting you, I can't believe he mistook you for either an experienced woman or a French spy." Lady Gwyneth gave another husky laugh, her voice lilting in amusement.

"I believe he based his decision to approach me on my choice of clothing and because I was speaking French to my maid. It wasn't Reggie's fault. It was a reasonable deduction to make in the country inn where the guests were mainly the local people. My

mother was half French, and I've inherited her love of fashion and dramatic colors."

"I'm glad that you are following your mother's French flair. Henrietta's mother was half French, but she has no interest in fashion. I love this shade of violet, almost lilac, for your walking dress."

Lady Henrietta gazed up to the ceiling, lost in thought. "What are the mathematical chances of you and Lieutenant Talley meeting? If you hadn't been sent down as a punishment to your aunt's, and if I hadn't cajoled my husband into giving Lieutenant Talley an assignment, then you would never have met."

Joie gulped the hot tea, burning her tongue. Her face also burned with embarrassment at the knowledge that these ladies knew of the scandal before Christmas. What a fool she had been to believe that Lord Ayer wanted to show her the blossoming cactus and not compromise her. Was there nothing the ladies didn't know? They couldn't possibly know of Reggie's scalding kisses, could they?

"Henrietta and I plan to sponsor you in society, helping to stop any further rumors surrounding your incident in the conservatory. With our support, there will be no lingering doubts of your rightful place in society or your courtship by Talley."

She was dreading her first appearance and knew that she would not go unscathed by the gossipmongers. How could she possibly convince her father of her capability to make decisions regarding Reggie if tongues were still wagging about her poor choices?

"I was upset to hear of your father's rejection of the lieutenant's offer. I have grown quite fond of Lieutenant Talley." Lady Henrietta brought her teacup to her lips as if she hadn't set off fireworks in Joie's stomach.

Joie stared at the lady, confounded and at a loss for words, which simply never happened. The crumpet with a thick coating of butter now sat somewhere between her chest and her stomach. She had so many questions she couldn't ask. First, how did the ladies already know of her father's refusal when she had only learned of it yesterday? She hadn't even known that Reggie planned to approach her father until her father had called her into his office and announced that she would be married to Albert Landry at the end of the season and any girlish fantasies about Reggie were to be forgotten. He was a rake who dabbled in the petticoat line.

According to her father, Reggie preferred opera dancers over gentle ladies.

“Hen and I want to give Talley and you every opportunity to continue your courtship in the eyes of the ton. Unfortunately, I won’t be physically present, but I’ve asked for the help of my Aunt Euphemia. She is a force to be reckoned with. Your father doesn’t stand a chance against Aunt Euphemia.” The glint in Lady Gwyneth’s eyes was downright devilish.

“Cord and I are hosting a ball next week. You must have received your invitation? Since we rarely host society events, it is turning out to be the major occasion of the season, from what I’ve been told. I plan to make your father’s acquaintance, as will Aunt Euphemia.”

“Yes, and Amelia, Lady Brinsley, was to make certain that you have the perfect gown. She is the inspiration for many of Mademoiselle Elodie’s designs. I do wish I could see Talley’s reaction to you in your new gown. Your choice of colors was bold, or at least that’s what Amelia has told me.”

Joie had wondered why the modiste had been so adamant that Joie had to have a new ball gown and had agreed to rush it for the Rathbourne ball. These ladies had been working on her behalf. No one had ever cared about her since the death of her mother. She was always the one to take care of her father, the household. The unshed tears forming behind her eyes burned.

“Once your father sees your and Talley’s acceptance into society, he will be forced to change his mind.” Lady Gwyneth’s eyes sparkled.

“My father is a difficult man. He wasn’t like this until my mother died...” She hadn’t lost just her mother, but she had also lost her loving father. “I’m so touched”—her voice cracked—“by your support. But my father isn’t easily swayed by the opinion of others. He holds his own in the highest esteem. He has forbidden me having any contact with Lieutenant Talley.”

“Yes, we’re aware of your father’s constrictions.” Lady Henrietta nodded.

There was a quiet knock on the door. The footman opened the door and saluted when Reggie walked into the room.

All the air in Joie’s lungs vanished. She stared, frozen.

“Lady Henrietta—” He halted in the middle of the room when he saw her. He was as shocked as she was.

“Joie, I mean Miss James.”

Her senses heightened as time seemed to slow. Lady Gwyneth’s snicker reverberated in her ears, the smell of the Oolong tea more pungent, the sunlight streaming through the windows brighter. Her body was attuned to every nuance of Reggie.

“Well, for once, I’ve caught you unawares, Lieutenant.” Lady Henrietta laughed, light and easy.

“Miss James has never been to Rathbourne House and requires a tour of the extensive gardens. My favorite spot for quiet reflection with Cord away from the house is to follow the path to the right. There you will find a private grotto and bench.”

Joie was captured by his intense stare. She felt the blush spreading across her chest and up her neck from the way Reggie focused solely on her. He hadn’t glanced at either of the other ladies.

“It would be my pleasure to escort Miss James.” His voice sounded dark and rough, and the way he emphasized “pleasure” caused her skin to bristle in awareness.

The silence in the room was thick as neither lady spoke to fill in the space. The sound of her breathing echoed loudly.

Reggie stood over her chair, his strong body looming over her. He was more handsome than she remembered. His eyes were the color of today’s spring sky. His morning coat hugged his massive frame. She knew every ripple and shadow of his chest after caring for him after he had been shot by the French. She hated that they couldn’t be alone now that they had returned to society.

“No more than twenty minutes, Talley. Miss James’s carriage will arrive to return her home,” Lady Henrietta said.

Reggie’s eyes gleamed in appreciation at Joie as he offered her his arm. “Yes, my lady. I will make sure that Miss James returns in time.”

Chapter Three

Shocked to find Joie in Lady Henrietta's drawing room, Reggie had gaped like a besotted fool. Joie was radiant in the morning sunlight. Her glossy black curls were tucked into a silly scrap of purple cloth with a plume that fell across her right eyebrow, giving her the look of a dashing pirate.

His heart sped as every muscle tightened at the nearness of her. In her violet dress, she looked as fresh and promising as the spring bluebells. She was more beautiful and more desirable than any of his nighttime fantasies.

Her wide black eyes filled with awareness of the need pulsing through him. She stood motionless, caught in the incandescent hunger arcing between them.

He wanted to lift Lady Henrietta out of her chair and embrace her for arranging this miracle. In the dismal days since Joie's father rejected his offer, he had been struggling to hatch a plan to gain the archbishop's approval. Reggie had two desperate choices—miraculously inherit a dukedom or inform her father that Joie had been ruined by their indecorous behavior in Rye. Neither was a good solution. She was a caring daughter and would want her father's approval. She deserved to be feted and celebrated, not the subject of a scandal and a forced marriage. But seeing her today, he knew he had been lying to himself. He couldn't watch other men touch her and woo her during the rest of the season. Joie was his since the first time he'd spotted her standing by the fireplace to warm herself.

He bowed and offered his arm. "Miss James, would you care for a tour of the gardens?"

When Joie placed her delicate hand on his arm, blood rushed under his skin, igniting a blue flame of want and need.

Aware of the ladies listening and watching, Reggie silently led Joie out the French door and onto the garden path that circled the expansive estate. Since he had been in charge of the Rathbournes' security before he became an agent, he knew every inch of the grounds and every possible place for assassins and spies to lurk. He never considered this information would be useful for a dalliance with Joie.

Neither spoke, not wanting to break the tendrils of excitement and eagerness enveloping them.

He had to slow his steps as anticipation of finally touching her, kissing her, danced a merry jig in his chest.

“How is your shoulder? Are you healed?”

He looked into her eyes, which were filled with tender concern. He could never allow this woman to go to anyone else. Landry and her father’s wishes be damned.

“I’m all healed because of your care.” Now wasn’t the time to recall her gentle touch on his bare chest and how he’d burned for her ever since. He cleared his throat, forcing every lustful thought into the deepest recesses of his being.

“How did you fare with your Aunt Eleanor?”

“I counted the days until I could return to London to see you. I worried that your wound suppurated or that the French spies came after you again.”

He led her toward the hidden grotto tucked behind the looming laurel hedges. A lone stone bench gave the secluded area an air of dangerous privacy. The late-March weather warmed this cozy corner. His breath quickened in anticipation of having this stolen moment.

“Was my father horrid to you? I wish there had been some way to warn me of your visit. I would have tried to soften my father.”

“I couldn’t call on you or write to you until I had declared my intentions. I wanted to be clear to your father that nothing untoward happened in Rye. I didn’t want you to come under any censure for our unusual meeting.”

He placed his hand on top of hers. Her vitality glimmered in the sunlight like the daffodils that lined the walk. The dismay and hopelessness that he couldn’t openly court her had vanished in her presence. “Nothing you could have said to him would have convinced your father to approve of me. He wants a prestigious son-in-law, not a soldier with no promise of social recognition.”

“I’m aware of my father’s opinion on the subject. He has forbidden me to have any contact with you. And I’m to marry Albert Landry.”

He clenched his fists at his side, trying to hide his jealousy and anger that Joie hadn’t told him of her close association with Landry. “Why didn’t you tell me in Rye of your arrangement with

Landry? I would never have..."

She stopped in the path and glared at him. "You believe that I would...with you...when I was engaged to another man? That I would fail to share this detail with you?"

"Your father said it's been an arrangement for years. Surely you knew."

"Do you think so little of my character?"

She gave a mirthless laugh, a sound that he had never before heard from his joyous Joie.

"Of course not." He hadn't thought she was the type of woman to play games. But with no ability to talk with her, to see her, his doubt grew. He lay awake, imagining Joie in Landry's arms, responding to his kisses as she had passionately responded to his.

"Albert is like an older brother to me. His father's estate borders ours, and I was friends with his younger sister. He is the son my father always wanted. My father demanded that I be educated as if I were a boy. When Albert showed interest in my studies, we were tutored together for a while, my father supervising Albert's education to prepare him to achieve the ecclesiastical success befitting an earl's second son. My father has ambitious plans for Albert, but I never knew that I was to be sacrificed."

"You never made the connection that your father would have his perfect son by marriage to his daughter?"

"Maybe your father treats his daughters differently than mine, but my father would never take into account my feelings about his plans for my future. I'm to be bound by whatever his wishes may be."

"You're right. My father is much the same. The wishes of his daughters—or his sons—have never crossed the general's mind."

"I was educated like his son not because my father saw me as worthy of my own thoughts, but because my father was lonely and wanted someone with whom to discuss his interests over dinner. He told me that my husband would thank him one day for broadening my perspectives."

"I'm still struggling that you never mentioned Albert." He tried but knew he failed to hide the hard edge of betrayal in his tone. She and Albert had a longstanding relationship. They had spent years together building a friendship, whereas he and Joie had enjoyed exciting, dangerous moments in Rye. Joie was a dutiful daughter, and her father esteemed Albert. How long before she

would acquiesce to her father's wishes?

"Like you never shared your penchant for opera dancers? My father was aware of your interest in a certain kind of woman over the ladies of the ton. Have you allowed one of your"—she waved her hand in the air—"since Rye?"

Her skin flushed, her eyes flashing with anger; she was all fire and heat, and the perfect woman for him.

"Those women meant nothing to me. I spent time with them over the so-called ladies of the ton because they didn't care about my position in society. I hated the façade of pretending to care when it's strictly a business transaction. I don't blame the young women. They are doing what their families expect them to do to make a favorable match. I just didn't want to participate."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. "I've no interest in opera dancers now that I've met you." He pressed a kiss to her palm. "You're so unlike the other women of the ton. You actually care about someone other than yourself."

He couldn't look away from the way her chest rose as he removed her thin lace glove.

"Your beauty and your passionate response to me is honest and sincere. I've never met a woman like you. I want to marry you and spend our lives together."

He slowly traced with his lips along her palm, following each crease.

The flush across her face and her tiny gasps with each flick of his tongue heated his body to a feverish pitch. He wanted so much from her, with her.

"Once we find the mole, we can elope." Her words came out raspy, stifled by her breathlessness.

He took her hand and pressed it to his chest. "Darling, we aren't going to elope. I refuse to have your name linked with a scandal. And I know you would never want to sever your relationship with your father. We will have to be patient."

"I don't want to be patient. I want you, your kisses. I want to take the place of all those opera dancers in your bed."

Flames of desire licked beneath his skin. He needed all his discipline to keep his passion in check. His mind raced with the possibility of eloping, of having Joie in his bed and not having to endure the season.

The idea was enticing, except for his dangerous mission and

the overwhelming problem of her father's disapproval. He was in no position to elope or court her when his focus needed to be on finding the mole who was a threat to the entire Rathbourne household. Letting her be courted by Landry and staying busy with the season's events was the logical option. But her soft whimpering sounds as he ran his tongue between each finger was clouding his judgment. Overtaken for a moment by the idea of eloping, he hadn't processed her exact words until now.

He released her hand and glowered at her soft eyes filled with passion. "There is no 'we' in finding the mole."

Her spine stiffened and she inhaled deeply, drawing his attention to her voluptuous chest. She had the body of a Renoir painting—creamy flesh that he wanted to explore for years.

She pulled her hand away. "You don't have to take that tone with me. I'm not planning on causing you any trouble. I want to help you. I want to help England."

"You can help me by remaining safe and enjoying the season with all the other gently bred ladies." He omitted any mention of spending time with Landry.

She jumped from the bench, her hands on her hips, her head tilted to the side. "I'm capable of so much more than just attending balls and soirees. Please let me be of assistance. People trust me with their secrets. And women will speak more readily to me than to you. I can interact with the lower servants of the Rathbournes, and they wouldn't be on guard. I'm not intimidating."

He ran his hand through his hair to stop himself from grabbing her and shaking her. Did she not understand what he had endured when she had been kidnapped? She could have been killed because of him. "I know all the household staff since I was in charge of security for the Rathbournes before I became an agent. I'm not intimidating to any of them. And it is obvious that you haven't thought your plan through. Why would the staff talk to an esteemed lady who has no connection to them?"

He was harsh, but Joie needed to be discouraged. He couldn't bear a repeat of Rye with Joie embroiling herself in his mission.

"There is no need to belittle me. I've run my father's household since I was barely in my teens after my mother died. I planned to have my housekeeper 'accidentally' run into the Rathbournes' housekeeper at the market and invite her for tea. And

I would just happen to go to the kitchen to speak with my housekeeper, giving me the opportunity to ask Lady Rathbourne's servant how she would handle a servant who might be stealing goods or money. It seems to me, the servant who is the mole is most likely in need of money. Why else would an English woman or man become a traitor?"

Reggie hated to admit his admiration for her logic. He had been following the same thread, but he had to tread carefully to avoid arousing suspicions.

"Your ideas are very sound."

Her wide grin paused his brain for a minute. She was such a delight with her open enthusiasm, the same enthusiasm that almost got her killed in Rye. How was he ever going to keep her safe?

Chapter Four

Joie shifted her weight, trying not to move her feet and raise suspicion as she stood behind the screen in the ladies' retiring room. Didn't the two stragglers hear the orchestra warming up? It was time for everyone to make their way back to the ball. It would be just her luck that the two chattering women had no partners for the next set. How much longer before the room was empty and she could sneak down the hall?

Fortunately, there was more than one chamber pot for the use of all the ladies at the ball. Otherwise, her plan of making her way to the servants' quarters in Rathbourne House would never work. She counted to ten again and steeled herself for patience.

"She sailed into the ball as if everyone would have forgotten her scandalous behavior with Lord Ayer."

The top of Joie's ears burned at the mention of the despicable lord. Could there be more than one woman compromised by Lord Ayer? He was enough of a scoundrel to have lured another innocent woman to the conservatory. If there were another victim of Lord Ayer's malicious behavior, Joie would wish to console the poor woman.

"She acts oblivious... As if everyone isn't talking about the daughter of an archbishop caught in a compromising situation."

Drat. They must be talking about her since there couldn't be another archbishop's daughter Lord Ayer had pursued. None of the other high-ranking clergy had a daughter taking in the season. They were all older, like her father. She had been a surprise for her childless elder parents.

"Did you see the color of her dress? You would expect after her scandal that she would avoid drawing attention to herself."

The two tittered.

Joie tried to peek through the crack in the screen to see who the women were.

"Blue and orange. Who would ever wear those two colors?"

The blue silk was closer to a blue gray; the orange was the color of a muted sunset in a winter sky. Had they not read *La Belle Assemblée*? Turkish blue was the rage in Paris. She had always fantasized about living in Paris, feeling more of an affinity for

French fashion and art, like her mother than the staid sartorial tastes of the English. Not anymore. After tangling with French spies, she was ready to fight against her grandparents' homeland. Her mother would have supported Joie's decision.

"She's supposedly brought Lieutenant Talley up to snuff, but her father has rejected his offer. Everyone had already given up any hope of ever landing him and his large inheritance since he has never shown any interest in decent women—probably why her father rejected him."

"I'd love that man in my bed. He is such a large, delicious specimen."

One of the women snorted.

"It explains his attraction to her, doesn't it? She dresses like one of his paramours."

Joie smiled. She hoped that Reggie found her daring and as exciting as his opera dancers. Her recent dreams involved more than kisses with the enthralling and ardent man. She was limited in her imagination of exactly how bedding occurred, but she wanted more—more of his touches, more of everything.

"Like all of us, she will marry her father's choice."

Joie wanted to shout "never." She would elope before she would marry Albert.

"I can't blame her for dallying with Lieutenant Talley before her marriage. Who could resist that man in his dress regiments?"

She wasn't dallying with Reggie. All they had indulged in so far was kisses—heated kisses burned into her skin and heart. She was more than ready to dally, but he continued to behave like a gentleman.

"We had better return. My mother will be looking for me. She's angling for a match with Baron Thomas's son."

"No, he's so...so..."

"Obese? He's the size of my childhood pony."

Their chortles followed them into the hallway.

Joie let out a large exhalation. She hadn't realized that she had been holding her breath in fear of discovery. She waited and listened to make sure no one else had entered the room.

After counting to twenty, she emerged from behind the screen and exited the small room that was on the main floor of the house. She had chosen it from the three retiring rooms since it was downstairs near the servants' stairwell. The other two retiring

rooms were near the ballroom on the second floor of the grand house.

Her plan was to make her way to the servants' hall and feign seeking a remedy for a headache from the housekeeper. Of course, it was beyond the pale for her to not have her chaperone, another of her father's elder sisters who had married a baron, to seek a headache powder. She would explain to the housekeeper that since her aunt was elderly, she had ventured downstairs herself. She thought her plan was sound, especially when she requested to rest until the powder began to work. This would allow her time to ingratiate herself into the housekeeper's good graces.

Her heart was hammering as she sashayed confidently past the footman stationed at the bottom of the staircase. She kept her chin up and walked toward the hall. It was lit by sconces mounted on the opposite side of the staircase. She thought there was most likely a library, a morning room, and a drawing room. When she had come for tea, she had been taken upstairs to Lady Henrietta's drawing room and wasn't able to assess the rooms on the main floor.

If Joie was correct about the design of these Jacobean houses, there should be a servants' stairwell behind the grand staircase. Her knees were weak, and her stomach was aflutter with anticipation. The only sounds were the shush of her skirt on the wood floor below and the orchestra's music from above.

In the first room on her right stood two footmen in front of an impressive mahogany door. As required by ton standard, footmen were imposing—tall but with slender builds. Surprisingly, these two were hefty with thick necks, not the usual lean symmetry that the aristocrats required for their servants. The blue-and-white livery stretched across their brawny shoulders. They were likely soldiers, chosen to protect the Rathbourne family. Reggie had been in charge of the household's safety before she met him on his first secret assignment in Rye. And it was his knowledge of Lady Henrietta that led to the whole blasted mess with the French. Joie wished she knew what role Lady Henrietta played in this mystery. She hoped to gain some revelations from the housekeeper if the woman was the chatty sort.

"My lady, may we help you?" The taller of the two giants stepped forward.

She proceeded down the hallway, calling gaily over her

shoulder, "Thank you. I'm fine."

His heavy footsteps continued close behind. Drat. Double drat.

"My lady, this is the family's quarters. The ballroom is upstairs. I will escort you to the ball since you've lost your way." His stiff stance and steely voice reminded her a lot of Reggie.

Her mission was over before she had begun. She had made it only halfway down the hall before being thwarted.

As she continued, the next door on her right opened. A stooped, white-haired gentleman stepped out. His hair was mussed from his glasses perched on his head, and his cravat was askew.

She halted and smiled at him.

"Henrietta sent you to escort me to the ball? How delightful. I usually have Lewis here as my escort. You're a lot prettier than he is."

The guard behind her covered his laugh with a cough.

"My lord. I'd be honored to escort you to the ball." Joie curtsied. "I'm Miss James. My father is Archbishop James."

"Tubby's daughter? I knew your father at Eton. He was years behind me." The gentleman's rheumy eyes glinted with mischief.

Joie giggled at the outrageous sobriquet. "My father has never shared his nickname." The idea was so foreign to her stern and stiff angular father. She had to stifle another giggle.

"I'm sure he hasn't." He offered his arm. "You may call me Uncle Charles since you're Tubby's daughter. And what a stir we'll cause when we enter the ballroom."

"Everyone will wonder how I've attracted such a dashing man as my escort." She grinned before batting her eyelashes in an outrageous fashion.

Uncle Charles chuckled and squeezed her arm. "What a bouncer. You remind me of Henrietta. She was a spirited little girl..."

He paused, momentarily lost in a memory.

Joie waited, not wanting to rush him. They stood together in silence until the footman interrupted. "Sir, you will be late for the ball."

His gaze searched Joie's in bewilderment. "Oh my. Is it time for the ball?"

"By the sound of the music, the dancing is in full swing." Joie wanted to comfort him. He reminded her of Mr. Turnstilton,

one of the elder parishioners who sometimes got befuddled but was as sweet and gentle a man as Uncle Charles.

"We haven't had a ball in several years. Cord and Henrietta want to raise morale with the blasted war raging." Uncle Charles shook his head vehemently, causing his glasses to slip partially down. "Oh, no. I'm always misplacing these darn spectacles. I need to return them to my office."

"I can return them for you."

"Nonsense. It's a mere few steps." He guided her into an expansive library. Every wall was lined with shelves of books. Two massive tables ran the length of the room. A fire blazed and candles were lit throughout the room, giving it a welcoming feeling despite the disarray of papers and tomes spread across the tables.

"Mr. Benning, why are you in this room?" the guard demanded.

A wiry, fair-haired gentleman startled before he turned away from the bookshelf. His narrow face registered surprise before shuttering.

"As I explained to Mr. Harcourt, I'm looking for a book for tomorrow's lesson with Edward."

"Isn't it time for you to be with Master Edward? Lord Rathbourne specifically said you'd be dining with Edward during the ball."

"I wanted to find this book before I joined Edward for dinner. I explained all of this to Mr. Harcourt. Don't you remember, sir?" His voice was solicitous toward Uncle Charles while his eyes raked over Joie, lingering on her deep cleavage.

"Just came to leave my glasses here. What book are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for Father Augustine of Hippo's work. It is difficult to keep pace with Edward's prodigious mind. We are working our way through philosophers."

Joie said, "You must be referring to Father Augustine's conversion to Christianity based on Cicero's lost *Hortensius*. It is required reading for philosophy students."

"You read Latin?" Mr. Benning asked, his gaze moving over her again in a very gentlemanly manner.

"Benning, women can read and read well. Have you not learned anything from my niece?"

Joie wanted to hug Uncle Charles. What an extraordinary

man, so unlike her father, who would never defend her despite both men being of an age that only saw women in a limited way.

"I've had an unusual education being the only child of the archbishop," Joie commented, as if her rigorous studies were of no consequence. But of course, to Mr. Benning, they weren't. The tutor's contemptuous response shouldn't come as a surprise to her. He was no different than most gentlemen. But his patronizing attitude coupled with his leering stares stirred a maelstrom of feelings. She wanted to react—to argue in all of womankind's defense or at least to stomp on his foot. But she was a lady, and nothing would come of an outburst with a thick-headed man. It would only confirm how emotional and unstable women could be.

"Of course, you have, my dear, with Tubby as your father. You must come with Edward, Benning, and I to 'The Odd Set of Volumes.' It's my book lovers' club. You will be a wonderful addition to all the stodgy old men."

"The club doesn't allow ladies. I'm sure you understand." Benning's forced smile made it only to his lips.

Joie was about to decline the invitation until his smirk. No, she didn't understand. But that debate wasn't worth her time with the narrow-minded tutor. Now, she would accompany Uncle Charles if Lady Henrietta approved. She wasn't sure how Reggie would react since he had given her the directive to avoid contact with anyone in the Rathbourne household. But meeting Uncle Charles had been totally by chance.

"I've no doubt the men will welcome this lovely, bright woman. Do you read any other languages?"

"Greek, of course, but I've always wanted to study hieroglyphics. I find the pyramids fascinating."

"If I weren't so old, I'd ask you to marry me. I'm keenly interested in the Egyptians."

Joie laughed. The delight in interacting with a warm older gentleman was so unlike her interactions with her father and his colleagues. An inner glow enveloped her. "I don't think our love of Egypt makes for the basis of a good marriage."

"You're probably right." His light eyes twinkled. "Shall we make our grand entrance to the ball, Miss James?"

"Yes, Uncle Charles." She was more than ready to dance with Reggie.

Chapter Five

Joie managed a smile as she was swept into the fast-paced Boulanger by Albert. There had been no way to escape dancing with him. The man had stood guard by the entrance when she returned to the ballroom. Fortunately, the dance required frequently changing partners, limiting their time together.

All week she had envisioned her first dance with Reggie—his gentle touch, his bright eyes shining with desire, and, when their eyes met, the vibrant connection that would leave them both breathless. Then there would be the magical moment when they would stroll in the garden, and her heart would race in anticipation of stolen kisses.

As she reeled through the steps, she searched the crowd for him. He was a head taller than almost everyone in the room, so he should be easy to spot. The blasted man was nowhere to be seen. He might be in danger right now, fighting French spies, and she was oblivious, twirling away with no reassurance that he was safe.

As the dance ended, Albert offered his arm. She waved her fan, trying to cool herself after the strenuous steps.

“Shall we fight our way for refreshments?” Without waiting for her consent, he took her arm and directed her to the table set with lemonade.

She didn’t want to spend time with Albert, tonight of all nights; especially when Lady Henrietta had offered her support for the match with Reggie. She also didn’t want the ton to conclude that because she was spending time with Albert, she had accepted him.

“You must tell my father how absurd his plan is for us to wed. You must tell him emphatically that you don’t want to marry me. He will listen to you over his mere daughter.”

“And why would I want to do that?” He handed her a small glass of lemonade.

“You must be joking?” Joie tried to contain the panic rising in her voice.

Albert’s already reddened face darkened to a deep shade of crimson.

“The match is sound. You will have greater connections

being associated with my family than you could acquire otherwise. I am the son of an earl. And your father's support will make my ascendancy in the church a foregone conclusion."

Joie gripped the lemonade so tightly that she was afraid the fragile glass might shatter. The sharp stab of this betrayal from the boy whom she had grown up with and trusted made it difficult to pull air into her lungs.

"How can you possibly want to marry me? You have no feelings for me." Her voice trembled between despair and anger. "Does it not matter to you that I have no feelings for you?"

"You will develop an affection for me once I've become your husband and we've shared our marriage bed. You're a passionate woman, Joie. I remember our first kiss."

Disgust, fury, and fear blended into a frothing tornado of emotions. Albert was the first person she had kissed. Naïve and romantic, she had hoped to feel magic with the older boy whom she admired. She felt nothing, and, afterward, they laughed about how they were meant to be friends.

"It doesn't matter to you that I don't want to be your wife in that way?"

She scrutinized Albert's face, looking for the young man she'd had affection for before he left for university. This man, with melting hair wax heavily applied to his Brutus haircut and a flamboyant waterfall cravat, was a stranger to her. Her life had suddenly careened out of control. She had remained confident that Albert would convince her father of the inadvisability of the match. But with both men in agreement, she and Reggie stood no chance of marrying.

"Calm yourself. It doesn't matter how you feel now. You're too inexperienced to understand..."

"You are mistaken if you believe that I would ever allow you to touch me." She slammed the glass on the table and began to walk away.

"You're making a spectacle of yourself. If you don't calm yourself, you'll have a fit of vapors."

"In all the years you've known me, have you ever seen me have vapors?" Shock was quickly morphing into rage. He wanted to marry her only to further his connection to her father. Her feelings were not to be considered. He assumed in his arrogant manner that she should be delighted to share his bed.

“You’ve always had a mercurial disposition. Once you’re a wife, you’ll be more content. Your unsteady nature is likely due to your French lineage.”

She took two steps before turning to confront him, unconcerned about the attention they were drawing. “Never speak of my mother.”

“Miss James, may I have the honor of the next dance?”

Joie startled at the deep bass voice behind her. She turned to find Lord Rathbourne, Reggie’s superior and Lady Henrietta’s husband. She had met the enigmatic man for the first time on her arrival at the ball. She had curtsied but didn’t have any conversation since there was a long line to greet the host and hostess.

Joie squirmed under his inscrutable gaze. His person was intimidating, with hard angles and a powerful presence. He loomed over both her and Albert. His eyes remained on her face, but she felt as if he were looking into her soul. No wonder the man was in charge of England’s security.

“Or if you’d prefer to take a stroll outside?” He offered his arm. “I observed that your company was becoming tedious.”

The cold, haughty stare that he directed at Albert was priceless, and Joie had to suppress the need to giggle.

“It would be a pleasure to walk with you, my lord.”

“I hope you won’t mind, Landry. Miss James is a dear friend of my wife’s, and I want to ensure that she enjoys tonight’s activities. I hold all of my wife’s friends’ happiness as my responsibility.”

Lord Rathbourne spoke in a calm, even voice, but the fine hairs on her arms prickled in awareness. He had declared to Albert that she was under his protection. She wasn’t sure if she was misinterpreting his words until she looked at Albert. His rosy color had left his face. Now he was the same hue as his white cravat.

Joie didn’t acknowledge Albert as she was led by Lord Rathbourne toward the French doors to the garden. “Was Landry importuning you?”

Joie was unsure of how much to share. Did he know of Reggie’s proposal? And her father’s plans?

He patted her hand on his arm. “Don’t fret about Landry. Lady Henrietta has decided that you will marry Talley. And once my wife sets her mind, be assured she rarely fails.”

“My lord, Lady Henrietta is most kind, but Albert informed me that he wishes to marry me. I’ve been clinging to the hope that he would convince my father that we are a mismatch. There is no affection between us.”

“My wife is signaling. It appears your father has arrived.”

Joie felt all the blood rush from her body. She would have stumbled if not for Lord Rathbourne’s strong arm guiding her.

“My father rarely attends social events.”

“Steady, Miss James. You must trust me that all will be well. Once I learned of your desire to be of service to our country, I added my support.”

Joie was regretting the lemonade that she had gulped once she glimpsed her father’s stern countenance and stiff bearing.

“Smile. Nothing confuses a man more than a woman’s smile.”

Despite the tremors rattling behind her knees, she laughed out loud, causing both her father and Lady Henrietta to turn and stare.

Lord Rathbourne grinned, and Joie almost stumbled again. A tense and controlling Lord Rathbourne was intimidating, but smiling, he was breathlessly handsome.

“That’s the spirit.”

Demonstrating a surprising familiarity, Lady Henrietta linked arms with Joie before she could curtsy to her father. “Miss James, I was just telling your father of your kindness to my Uncle Charles and how my husband and I are in your debt.”

Lady Henrietta had been shocked to see her uncle arrive at the ball and to have her uncle in good spirits and eager to socialize.

“Thank you, my lady. But it is I who should thank you. Your uncle is a warm and interesting gentleman. He asked me if I would accompany him to his book lending library. If this meets with your approval, my lady, I would be very pleased. He and I share an interest in Egypt.”

Lord Rathbourne groaned as Lady Henrietta smiled. “Oh my. Uncle is quite taken with everything Egyptian. Are you sure you want to spend time with elderly gentlemen and discuss mathematical and spiritual theories about the origins of the pyramids and why and how they were built?”

“It sounds delightful to me. I would like to discuss something more than fabrics and hairstyles on occasion.” Joie still

loved fashion, but she was more comfortable in Uncle Charles's company than she had been with the ladies in London that she had met.

"My instincts were correct. You are so much more than a beautiful young woman."

Embarrassed by Lady Henrietta's praise, Joie looked at her father. "Uncle Charles shared that you went to school together, Father."

"Yes, it was many years ago. I'll have to make my regards to Harcourt."

"Your Grace, my uncle also shared that he remembers your wife, who was beautiful and charming, and that Joie closely resembles her. He also said that you were a lucky man to have married a diamond of the first order," Lady Henrietta said.

Her father's face softened, and his lips curved into a partial smile. "I was a very fortunate man. My Marissa would be proud of Joie and all her accomplishments."

Stunned, Joie stared at her father. Her mouth surely was hanging open. He had never once mentioned her resemblance to her mother and had given her little praise for her accomplishments. Only Esme, her maid, told Joie how much she was like her mother.

"I'm sorry that you lost your wife. I can't imagine a life without my husband." Lady Henrietta's voice grew wistful as she stared at her husband's strong countenance.

"As it is for me, my dear." Lord Rathbourne's quiet words coupled with his passionate look directed at his wife made Joie look away. It was an intimate moment, not to be shared.

The pain that crossed her father's face was painful to witness. Her feelings for Reggie gave her more insight into how much her father had suffered. As a girl, she had never appreciated her father's loss.

"I'm sorry that your mother isn't here to see your entry into society," Lady Henrietta spoke to Joie. "Any mother would be glad to claim you as her own. And I hope, sir, that you'll allow Joie to be under my tutelage in negotiating the ton's demands. I plan to make sure Miss James enjoys the season."

"Yes, my wife is fond of Miss James. We hope that you can join us for dinner with your daughter very soon?" Lord Rathbourne invited.

Her father, an astute man who had climbed to the highest

ranks of the clergy, would never slight someone as powerful as Lord Rathbourne or his wife.

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Now, let’s go find some suitable young men for you to dance with.” Lady Henrietta linked arms with Joie. “Oh my. My favorite of all the young men has arrived—Lieutenant Talley. We’ve become very attached to him, haven’t we, Cord?”

“Yes, the lieutenant has been working on a special project of the utmost importance to national security. He has a bright future ahead of him.”

Joie tried not to gape as Reggie walked toward them. He wasn’t in his uniform but in black formalwear that hugged his broad shoulders and tapered to his lean waist. His sandy brown hair was brushed back, making his bright blue eyes mesmerizing.

Her face flushed and her heartbeat went on a merry dance spurred by his closeness.

Reggie bowed. “Lady Henrietta and Lord Rathbourne. Your Grace.”

Her father barely nodded his head. “Lieutenant Talley.”

Time slowed as she waited for him to address her. The ballroom’s sounds and lights faded into the background, condensed into this one magical moment.

“Miss James.” His voice smoothed all of her shattered nerves, the painful encounter with Albert vanishing as soon as Reggie was near.

“Your timing is impeccable, Talley. I’ve just told His Grace that I plan to make sure that Miss James has a wonderful evening. You, sir, are available for the next dance?”

“It would be an honor to lead Miss James out. Of course, with your permission, Your Grace?”

“His Grace and I are in full agreement that his daughter’s happiness is most important.” Lady Henrietta smiled at Joie’s father before taking his arm. “I want to reacquaint you with my uncle, who is looking forward to seeing his old classmate. I think you might want to defend the stories that my uncle has been sharing about your behavior at school.”

Her father gave Lady Henrietta a disapproving look that was familiar to Joie. It had no effect on Lady Henrietta, who led her father to an alcove where Uncle Charles was seated with a large woman dressed in a purple dress with a fuchsia turban.

“My lord, I’ve never seen anyone bend my father to their will as Lady Henrietta just did. Most impressive, but I’m afraid he won’t be swayed for long.”

Lord Rathbourne grinned. “Your father doesn’t stand a chance. My wife has led him to my Aunt Euphemia, who is seated with Uncle Charles. I’ve seen my aunt make grown men cry. The king is afraid of my aunt.”

Joie laughed, but neither man joined in.

Reggie raised his eyebrows. “She is a force that few men can handle.”

Now Joie wanted to meet her.

“Talley, take Miss James on the dance floor or face my wife’s wrath.” Lord Rathbourne chuckled as he walked away.

A devastating grin spread across Reggie’s face as he offered his arm. “Miss James, shall we dance?”

She placed her hand on his arm. The strong muscles flexed under her touch. He covered her hand with his. His mere contact enveloped her in heat and possession. And suddenly the ballroom glittered, and the lights were brighter from Reggie touching her.

Chapter Six

Reggie stretched his arms, reaching for the ceiling. He had been sequestered in the small room since early morning, reviewing the activities in Rathbourne House. Unlike last night's guests at the ball, a soldier had to report for duty, not loll in bed all morning. The idea of lolling in bed with a black-haired siren hardened his body and heated his blood to the boiling point.

Joie, with her big black eyes sparkling in exhilaration, her glossy ebony hair swept up in daring ringlets, had glowed like no other lady at the ball. Every man present in the ballroom was aware of her radiant warmth. And he was the lucky bastard she wanted to marry. He couldn't help but be a little smug about how he had captured the heart of the rare beauty. Now, if her father would only accept Reggie's proposal.

Unable to claim her as his own last night had been torture. Their first and only dance together, and he was barely able to speak or touch her. The blasted contra dancing required that they continually change partners, giving him little opportunity to quench his burning need for her. His fantasy of stealing away into the garden to continue her education on kissing remained exactly that—a dream.

Lady Henrietta had made sure that her protégé would be a success in the ton's eyes. Joie was never without a partner the entire evening. Not that he begrudged Joie enjoying herself among company, especially knowing how lonely her childhood must have been. But he had hoped for a few moments alone with her instead of watching her dance with other men. He had to pretend that he didn't care that other men were touching her, smiling at her, and leering down her revealing dress.

And who was he kidding? Joie wasn't in need of any lessons in kisses. He was the one who needed tutelage. Her open and passionate response had sent him into a tailspin of feelings. All of his paid experiences didn't require an honest exchange. He was venturing on new and unsteady ground.

A loud knock on the door shook him out of his reverie.

He stood to open the door, expecting that Mrs. Brompton had sent a tray to tide him over in the late afternoon hours. He

salivated with the expectation of hot buns, ham and cheese, and cakes. The Rathbourne cook was extraordinary.

Instead, Private Lewis, a brawny Welsh who matched Reggie in size, arrived to give a report.

“Any luck?” Reggie closed the door.

Lewis shook his head. “Either he’s very clever, or he’s very innocent.”

“I think we should assume he is very clever.”

Reggie sat behind the oak table that served as his desk.

Papers were scattered over the entire surface. He’d reviewed the household receipts each week to see if there had been any changes in the pattern of deliveries. After the ball, there was a stack. This was not a likely way that the mole would be receiving or sending coded messages, but every possibility had to be considered.

Reggie pushed the papers to one side of the table. Stringent surveillance of the estate had been put in place under Reggie’s leadership. Food and spirit deliveries were inspected by soldiers acting as footmen. The servants understood that Lord Rathbourne held an important role in the war against France, and there were many who would like to harm him. What the staff didn’t know was that Lady Henrietta, her brother, Lord Kendall, and her Uncle Charles were England’s finest code breakers, working from the library on the estate.

No one in the household except for Mrs. Brompton, the elderly housekeeper, and her husband, the butler, knew of the Harcourts’ secret work or Reggie’s newest assignment. The Bromptons had been Lady Henrietta’s servants and came with her when she married Lord Rathbourne. It was an unusual arrangement due to Uncle Charles’s failing mental faculties. He often became muddled in his thinking, but the familiarity of the Bromptons helped to lessen his confusion.

Reggie had winnowed down the parameters of his search. Besides looking at all guests and deliveries that came and went, he now had all the servants who left the estate on a regular basis monitored. The assistant cook and her staff who did the shopping, as well as any servant who was sent on an errand, were followed by a footman/soldier.

All the servants had been interviewed when Reggie took over the safety of the household. He suspected no one, or he wouldn’t have continued their employment. Working for Lord

Rathbourne was considered a great honor, and the turnover in staff was basically nonexistent.

The thought that he'd cleared someone who had sold information on Lady Henrietta to the French had him on edge. Recently hired staff included a stable hand, a scullery maid, and a tutor whom Lord Rathbourne's man of business had hired. Young Edward Harcourt was as bright as his older siblings and had outgrown his previous tutor.

Reggie had the stable boy and scullery maid followed in the first weeks of their employment, but they rarely left the premises. When they did, it was either to see family or, in the case of the stable hand, to visit the local pub. To make sure that the lad wasn't meeting a French spy, one of the soldiers spent several evenings in the pub. The soldier was grateful for his assignment.

"Go on." Reggie pointed to the chair across from him for Lewis to be seated.

Reggie suspected that the tutor was the mole, but he didn't want to act on his suspicion yet. Benning, of all the staff and servants, had the most opportunity to pass information since he had access to the library where the code breakers worked and left the estate frequently with his charge. On his arrival from Rye, Reggie had arranged that Benning was never to be unsupervised in the library.

Reggie directed Ford, his predecessor in charge of the Rathbournes' security, to keep track of the tutor whenever he left the estate. Benning regularly had outings with Uncle Charles and Edward. Both Harcourts were oblivious of anything transpiring around them when they were engrossed in an intellectual topic, which was most of the time.

"Nothing different in his behavior for today's trip to The Odd Set of Volumes. Benning left Uncle Charles at the main table to join his cronies and went to the rear of the library in the stacks, preventing a full view of his activity from my position at the door. He always lifts books off shelves and examines them or seems to be reading them. He always has his back to me. He didn't meet with anyone today, and I never spotted anyone new or suspicious in the library."

"He didn't reach into his pocket?"

"He's blown his nose once or twice but not today."

But today's information from a previous employer that

Benning had significant gambling debts solidified Reggie's suspicions. Money was always a strong motive for treason.

Reggie would find out how Benning was passing the information and then set a trap for the entire network. It had to be the regular trips to The Odd Set of Volumes, where Benning had freedom and access to hide the message. It was the logical conclusion.

"Everything was the same except for the excitement that Miss James's arrival had on the men." Lewis chuckled. "Not that I can blame the old goats for lusting after her. She's a fine lady who had all the gentlemen drooling. Besides being a looker, she's real smart when she's talking with Uncle Charles and his friends about Cicero and Hortense or someone."

Rage and shock filled Reggie's lungs, inflating him like a hot air balloon. My God, it couldn't be happening again. Joie was entangled in his assignment, placing herself in danger. How the hell had she managed to be in the company of his main suspect?

"What's the matter, sir? Your face is turning a purplish red. You look as though you might have an apoplectic fit."

Reggie exhaled loudly and tried to form words. "Why didn't I know that Joie... Miss James accompanied the men to the library this afternoon?"

Lewis, no fool, went on high alert. He sat up straighter in his chair.

"Her presence today was a surprise to me. Her carriage arrived as we were leaving for the library. I didn't know, sir, that you were acquainted with the lady. I meant no disrespect." Lewis's voice was laced with amusement.

"Explain to me how a young woman who is newly known to Lady Henrietta was included in today's family excursion with a possible spy?"

As fear pulsed through his veins, Reggie reassured himself that Joie had been safe in Lewis's care. The soldier was one of the best and wouldn't have allowed anything to happen to her on his watch.

"She must have made the plans last night with Uncle Charles when I found her in the family quarters. When I was requesting that she return to the ball, Uncle Charles came out of the library, and they struck up a conversation."

Reggie leaned over the desk. He was within striking distance

of Lewis. And the need to connect his fist to Lewis's face was overwhelming.

"And you're now reporting that a stranger was in the family quarters? Did you share Miss James's appearance with Sergeant Ford?"

Reggie felt satisfaction to see Lewis's neck and face flush.

"Everyone was busy with the ball. I didn't see any harm in the lady's appearance. She introduced herself to Uncle Charles. He knew her father from school days. And Mr. Harcourt was pleased to be in her company. I escorted them both to the ballroom."

"And what if the lady was a French spy who'd lied about who her father was?" Lewis was a good soldier, but he didn't grasp the cunning of their enemy. "Uncle Charles is a friendly man whose judgment sometimes isn't sound. Would you agree?"

"Yes, sir."

"At least you didn't allow Uncle Charles to take her into the library. Not that Miss James poses a threat, but in another circumstance..."

Lewis shifted his immense weight, causing the wood chair to creak. His hands tightened on his thighs.

"Uncle Charles brought her into the library to leave his glasses on the table before making their way upstairs. Benning was in the library."

"Benning was unsupervised in the library?"

"Yes, sir. Uncle Charles must have allowed him access. I was absent from my post because Lord Rathbourne had sent me on an errand for Lady Henrietta. All of the soldiers were being used for the preparation of the ball."

It was reassuring that he and the code breakers had anticipated the possibility of Benning using the ball to gain access. Reggie had made sure there was nothing of importance left in the library. Vital information was sent to the Abchurch offices.

"Why wasn't I alerted immediately?"

"I couldn't find you at the ball, and I had to return to guarding Lord Rathbourne's study. There are always to be two of us at the post."

Of course, Reggie knew; he had set the system in place.

"Do you have any idea how long Benning was unsupervised in the library?"

"Less than five minutes. Uncle Charles came out of the

library as I was detaining Miss James. And they returned to the library within minutes.”

Reggie took a deep breath. There was nothing of importance on the tables where the Harcourts worked. Despite anticipating Benning sneaking into the library, Reggie was no further along in uncovering the method used by Benning to smuggle out the information.

“Was there anything suspicious in how Benning responded to Miss James this morning?”

“No, sir. He walked behind Uncle Charles and Miss James and then went his separate way after they returned to the estate.”

“And where is Benning right now?” Reggie knew Benning was being watched but, if he thought he had something to share, he would be desperate to contact his handler.

“Everything is under control. Benning is working on mathematics with Edward. Peters is guarding young Edward. Uncle Charles retired for a lie-down, and Miss James is having tea with Lady Henrietta in her ladyship’s drawing room.”

“Did you make any stops on your way home that might have given Benning an opportunity to send a message?”

“We made many stops in the park. All of the gentlemen from last evening wanted to pay their respects to Miss James.”

Reggie ground his teeth together instead of saying every swear word he had acquired from his military years. Joie’s arrival had interrupted Benning’s search in the library and Reggie’s plan to unmask the ring. He assured himself that the tension in his jaw had little to do with jealousy prompted by hearing of the adulation from other men.

“Did Benning interact with any of the gentlemen?”

“There is a possibility that Benning gave a signal to the girl who approached us to sell her flowers. My focus was first on the girl to assess if she posed any threat to Uncle Charles and Miss James before I was able to watch Benning. He may have given her a subtle head shake.”

“We’ve got the bastard!” Reggie slammed his fist on the table.

“Do you think so, sir?”

“Quite ingenious. The handler probably employs different flower girls to report whether the gentleman shakes his head yay or nay. And there is no way to track these girls since there are

hundreds on the street.”

“Should I take some men to bring her in for questioning?”

“She’s already gone for the day. She doesn’t have to stay on the street selling the flowers when she gets paid after she delivers the message from Benning. And, if I’m right, there will be a different girl tomorrow. It’s an inexpensive way of monitoring whether Benning sends a message.”

The thrill of finally capturing the bastards resonated through him. The knowledge slowed his breathing and tightened his muscles in anticipation of winning.

“Does Uncle Charles plan to go to The Odd Set of Volumes tomorrow?”

“I think he would go every day if Miss James accompanied him.”

Reggie knew that Lewis was trying to provoke a response from him, but that didn’t stop him from reacting.

“Miss James is not getting anywhere near The Odd Set of Volumes or Benning. You are to report to me if she tries. I don’t care what else you’re supposed to be doing. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Lewis’s tone was respectful despite the smirk.

“I will arrange for Uncle Charles and Benning to go tomorrow. We will follow the flower girl covertly to trace her handler. Then we’ll set up surveillance on that person. It’s following the inner workings of a labyrinth, but we’ll eventually get to the nest of rats.”

“I’d like to be part of the team to take the damn Frenchies down.”

“You need to maintain your role as Uncle Charles’s bodyguard. We don’t want to alert Benning that we’re on to him by a sudden change in men.”

“I understand, but having the bastard pretend to care about Uncle Charles and Master Edward... And act so superior to the servants. All puffed up. He’s a supercilious ass, and I want to get my hands on him.”

“We have to stay focused on the bigger picture if we want to capture the entire ring. You need to report to Sergeant Ford what transpired with Benning and the lapse in protocol. You needn’t report anything about Miss James. I will be handling her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Reggie followed Lewis quickly out of the room.

It was time to have a little tete-a-tete with Miss Joie James to lay down the rules. She was not to come to Rathbourne House until Benning was in custody.

Chapter Seven

Reggie took the stairs two at a time to Lady Henrietta's drawing room. The intense physical movement helped to reduce his fury to simple screaming frustration. Maintaining his composure and not giving Lewis any clue about his reaction to Joie being near Benning had depleted his restraint.

Last night's annoyance from the ball coupled with Joie's trip to the library with Benning pushed him right to the edge of his well-honed control.

He didn't wait to be announced but thrust the door open well ahead of the footman-soldier.

Reggie halted mid-step. Aunt Euphemia was sitting next to Joie on the settee. Her signature turban was festooned with a bird's nest. Could the day get any worse? Lord Rathbourne's aunt was crafty and didn't miss anything.

"Oh my, Talley. You've been spending too much time with my nephew. You've acquired the same thunderous scowl." The older woman patted her lips with her napkin. "Don't you agree, Henrietta?"

Lady Henrietta laughed. "My goodness, you might be right. Will you join us for tea? Or did you come to ask if Miss James would like to accompany you in the garden? You appear to have something important you wish to say to her."

Reggie's hands clenched at his side. Both Aunt Euphemia, a former agent during the French Revolution, and Lady Henrietta assumed that his black mood was due to Joie's success last night rather than the danger she had placed herself in.

Why should he be jealous that Joie had the entire male population at her feet? Though he was man enough to admit they were right. He was jealous after hearing of all the men seeking Joie at the park and after watching her the previous night in other men's arms. But he refused to give voice to the niggling fear that Joie would change her mind about marrying him.

"Miss James, I'm surprised that you aren't exhausted after the ball and the demands of dancing the entire night." He wished he could now reclaim his words. He had been happy that her reentry into society was celebrated and that she wasn't shunned.

Aunt Euphemia muffled her snort behind her napkin.

"I don't find myself tired at all. I had the most stimulating morning with Uncle Charles."

Reggie controlled his need to mention the danger or all the men in the park with an attentive audience.

"Miss James has been wonderful with Uncle Charles today. Seeing what Miss James's attention has done for him has been enlightening. My poor uncle needs more company and lively conversation. He was alert and engaged in ways I haven't seen for months. I'm happy that Miss James accompanied my uncle to the library today," Lady Henrietta said.

Inexplicably, Charles had days when he was brilliant and able to attend to his work, and other days when he floated in his memories. It had been agreed to limit his interactions to family and a tight circle of acquaintances to prevent him from sharing the secrets of the clandestine work he and his family did.

Why didn't the intelligent women perceive that Benning was a threat to Joie? Of course, he and Lord Rathbourne had reassured Lady Henrietta that the soldiers would protect Edward and Uncle Charles from Benning if Reggie's suspicions were correct. But this was Joie. Didn't her ladyship understand the difference?

"What Henrietta means is that she and I will be displeased if Miss James is not treated in the kindest manner." If Aunt Euphemia's imperious tone wasn't clear enough, her direct look that skewered men into bumbling idiots was.

Reggie couldn't explain to the two ladies who were bent on protecting their little fledgling that Joie had endangered herself without alerting Joie to his mission. And if Joie knew Benning was suspected of being the mole, there was no stopping her from interfering.

"With your permission, I'd like to take Miss James for a stroll in the garden."

"Her carriage will arrive in the next hour," Lady Henrietta warned.

Joie placed her cup on the low table and stood.

He hadn't allowed himself to meet her eyes, not wanting the other women to see his feelings for this one woman bubbling so close to the surface, ready to erupt.

She curtsied to both ladies. "Thank you for the most delightful day. I hope I can soon visit Uncle Charles again. You

believe I'm helpful to Uncle Charles, but I'm benefitting more. He listens to me and respects my opinion. I've never experienced that from a gentleman before."

And Reggie's anger dissipated like the steam from a boiling kettle. He wanted to take her into his arms and hold her. He wanted to listen to all her opinions on Cicero and whatever else held her interest. What damage had her overbearing father done to her? And now *he* was about to behave like her tyrannical father, bending her to his will.

"It is a conundrum for men to understand that women also like to be appreciated for their minds, isn't it, Lieutenant? It is a challenge for most men, but I do believe Henrietta is right. You are up for the challenge."

He hated Aunt Euphemia's perceptive stare boring into him, reading all the unfamiliar emotions and his illogical thoughts pummeling him.

Reggie forced a smile and nodded to both ladies. He extended his arm to Joie and led her out of the room, knowing the ladies registered every moment between him and Joie. He couldn't wait until this damn courting was done and he and Joie would be spared from the constant scrutiny.

When the door closed, she leaned closer and whispered, "I was hoping that you would seek me out. I've so much to tell you. Mr. Benning might be the mole. He was in the library last night. If you had seen the surprised look on his face when Uncle Charles and I arrived, you'd recognize that he was guilty."

Her wide eyes glittered with exhilaration. "How easy for him to leave secret codes in the books at The Odd Set of Volumes. Don't you agree?"

With his brain spinning, Reggie was lost. "Replay of Rye," he growled under his breath. Joie, observant and perceptive, had landed right in the middle of his mission exactly where he didn't want her. But he couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't disappoint her. She wanted to play a role in his life.

"Your observations are completely accurate. You're an amazing woman, Joie."

He placed his hand over hers, which was daintily perched on his arm, and led her along the hallway, gathering her cloak before leading her outdoors to their private grotto. Once they moved away from the house, Reggie confided, "Benning is most likely the mole."

But I don't have proof yet."

"Yes, he's very clever and arrogant. I noticed when I was seated with Uncle Charles at the library, he positioned himself to the side, out of sight of the door. From my angle at the table, I was able to see his hands. He took nothing out of his pockets. Does he stand in the same place in the stack at each visit?"

Brilliant and deductive, Joie had all the talents to be an agent. Would she be satisfied just to discuss Reggie's work and not get involved? He couldn't imagine allowing her to put herself in harm's way.

"It would be a lot simpler if he didn't change, but he never stands in the same area."

He led her toward the bench. She was the epitome of a gently bred lady in her flowered muslin dress, her thick hair twisted into a knot at her neck. It was a conundrum—a beautiful and sensitive young woman engaged in a critical conversation about dangerous French spies. As a blossoming young woman in her first season, she deserved to be protected. He wanted to spare her from the evils of the world, but paradoxically, the ladies who had chosen to nurture her were not women who wished to be sheltered from the world.

"I knew he was too cunning. All you would need to do is examine the books where he positions himself. His egotism will be his downfall. What will you do next?"

Her eagerness to be a partner was endearing and contagious.

Reggie noted that she didn't say "we"—maybe a good sign or maybe not. Having her near to him, away from everyone for this brief time, left him unwilling to discuss Benning or his assignment. If truth be known, he didn't want to talk at all.

The flecks of sunlight highlighted her hair, creating an almost blue hue. He wanted to unfasten her thick hair and thread his fingers through the mass. He wanted to be the only man who saw her hair unbound. Heat and need pulsed through his body.

"With you near, I don't want to waste a moment of our time together. I want to focus only on you. We'll eventually capture Benning."

Reggie inhaled the spring scents of new grass mingled with the aroma that was all Joie. Her flowery fragrance wafted over him in the gentle warmth of the sun.

"It was pure torture to be unable to claim all your dances. I

hated every moment you weren't in my arms."

Her hands fluttered in front of her as her cheeks pinked.

Now that she was near, he couldn't stop his tightly held feelings from pouring out. "I'd rather be shot at than spend another night watching other men touch you. I wanted to kill every one of them for being the recipient of your smiles."

"I felt the same... Not that I wanted to kill anyone." Her light laughter floated around them. "I couldn't bear the way you were grinning and laughing with Miss Tennyson and then Miss Brownley. Both are beautiful women and neither of their fathers would object to you marrying them."

Suddenly standing with Joie in the spring sunshine filled his soul. All the fears and worries about her involvement in his assignment and how they would manage their future floated away like cherry blossoms drifting on the breeze.

"You were the sole woman I wanted to dance with—last night and every night of my life. I wouldn't have asked any lady, but Lady Henrietta enlisted me to partner the wallflowers."

"It was the same for me. She kept introducing me to gentlemen. I don't understand why. She said she approves of our engagement."

"Lady Henrietta was assuring that none of the past scandal touched you."

"Does Lady Henrietta question my judgment after I was so gullible in believing Lord Ayer?"

He lifted her chin, his heart swelling with joy that he could finally touch her. "Not in the least; she's establishing you as a miss of the first water."

His respect for her ladyship increased even more by her genuine care of Joie.

"Maybe she wants to give you a chance to meet other men to make sure that your feelings for me weren't based on the excitement and danger we experienced together. Not that I'm allowing you to change your mind." As if he had any control.

"I'll never change my mind. The danger and intrigue were enticing, but I will always cherish the days we shared after you were injured. Not that I wanted you to be shot." Her look of adoration made it difficult not to reach for her and kiss away every doubt and worry between them.

"Without all of society's strictures, we had time to truly talk.

And not of just the weather but honest conversation. The candlelight, the fire crackling, and the wind howling with the two of us sharing our lives will always be a precious memory.”

If Reggie hadn’t been shot, they would have shared more than conversation. But he would never forget her bedside vigil, her womanly concern and touch, or her heartbreaking description of her isolated childhood. Reggie wanted to take away every hurt she had suffered, to always protect her against ever feeling loneliness. She deserved to be loved, with caring people surrounding her.

“We’ll have many more moments together once we get past this blasted season. I’m not sure I can survive another ball without you next to me.”

He traced her full lips with his thumb, watching her black eyes dilate and her breath catch. “I want to kiss you. I’ve wanted to kiss you every minute since we’ve been apart. It’s all I can think of.” He didn’t include everything he wanted since he didn’t want to shock her sensibilities.

She went on tiptoe and pressed her warm body against him. “I’ve dreamt about you like this since the last time we were in the garden.”

He wrapped her in his arms, bringing her close, trying to meld their bodies into one, to imprint the glorious feeling on them both.

He pulled her lower lip between his teeth before tracing her full lips with his tongue.

She slid her tongue over his, reaching into his mouth. Reggie groaned with the pure pleasure that ignited his need to taste her all over. He tried to be gentle, but he was desperate for her. His tongue thrust into her eager mouth.

He trailed kisses along her neck, then nipped her tender skin before kissing it again. Joie’s mewling sounds coupled with her squirming against his hard length made him frantic. It would be so easy to unbutton his falls and thrust into her. Then the archbishop would be forced to agree to their marriage.

He fought for control as he pressed his thigh between her legs, bringing contact where he wanted to taste and explore. She rubbed against him, sending a bolt of lust through him.

He had to have more of her, more of her voluptuous body. He couldn’t play the role of a gentleman any longer. He lowered one shoulder and then the next of her morning dress, revealing her

large, dark, erect nipples against her pale silk chemise.

Reggie couldn't draw air into his lungs. She was sensuality incarnate, a goddess of beauty. The splendor of womanhood. Awe and reverence overwhelmed him. He wanted to worship this one woman for the rest of his days.

He teased a nipple, his finger drawing a circle of fire around one and then the other. He had no patience for gentlemanly restraint. "I want to put my mouth on you and suck hard. Do you want me to?"

Her face was flushed and her eyes were soft with desire. "I do. Please, Reggie. I'll die if you don't."

Reggie bent and teased his tongue around the areola as he plucked the other nipple, pulling and pinching lightly before he had to take her breast into his mouth.

Joie groaned and moved closer to him, offering him more. He licked and sucked as his fingers grasped and plucked her other nipple. Joie threw her head back and moaned.

He wanted to spend a lifetime seeing her like this, lost, mindless, and overflowing with passion.

He switched breasts as he ran his hands along her hips, then her backside, before he cupped her mound.

"Oh, Reggie," she pleaded.

His hand slid along her soft thighs under her dress. He would bring her to pleasure. He'd never force her into marriage. But when they shared a glance during this time of separation, she'd know she belonged to him.

He wanted to lift her skirt and press his mouth to her womanhood.

Searching for the slit in her drawers, he found her swollen and moist.

Sweat poured off him. His body was tight and ready to be immersed in her hot, wet body.

He rubbed her swollen bud between his fingers as he pulled hard on her nipple. Her muscles tightened, and her breath quickened as she rushed toward fulfillment. One touch, and she was already climbing to the peak. He took her cries into his mouth, needing to share in her passion.

He teased her lightly as he kissed her breast, letting her ride the wave of pleasure.

Her face was flushed, and her eyes were closed, her arousal

filling his nostrils. She was magnificent. And although he was hard and needed release, he was content for now, knowing she was his future. He lowered her skirt and pulled her into his arms, wanting to hold his sweet innocent.

"I... I never." She opened her eyes. He was captured by the lingering desire in her eyes.

He caught her chin to look deep into her eyes. "I want to give you much more, but we have to wait, despite how tempted I am."

And then he kissed her, pouring all of his love and adoration for her into that kiss.

"I want more too. Is it always like this?"

How could he explain when it was all new for him too? His feelings for her, of tenderness, passion, and protection, all melted together. "It will only get better. I promise you."

Reggie was barely holding onto his gentlemanly control of not giving her more when he heard Gus's bark, followed by Edward's voice.

"You've found them, Gus?"

Saved by a Labrador. Lady Henrietta had sent Gus and Edward to find them. And lucky she did.

Chapter Eight

Joie crossed the square, her maid close by, one step behind. They weren't far from the path Joie strolled with Uncle Charles after the book club meeting at The Odd Set of Volumes.

Her nervousness drove her quick pace.

"You've been in a daze all morning. Now you're almost running...in a most unseemly fashion," her maid Esme huffed.

Joie searched the surrounding area for suspicious-looking types, especially men lurking. But everything was unchanged from yesterday. Ladies and gentlemen strolled on another surprisingly sunny day for the usual wet spring of England's clime. Nannies with babies in their prams and children racing ahead were also taking advantage of the fine late-March day. The bright skies and the scent of the budding flowers and trees made everything feel normal. Hopeful. Not fraught with spies and plans to subvert the government and king.

"I refuse to run at my age. Did you not sleep well? Your bedclothes were in shambles. Are you ill?"

Joie had barely slept. She lay awake, reliving every passionate moment with Reggie. The way he touched her, so tenderly and possessively. And how she, lost in sensation, abandoned all propriety. She now understood why women got caught in scandals. She could still feel his mouth on her breasts. It was all a revelation and, if anyone had explained beforehand, she would have been shocked and repulsed. But she wasn't repulsed in the slightest; in fact, the complete opposite. It was the most wonderful and natural experience of her life, and she wanted Reggie to do everything again...and more.

Joie attempted to rid herself of the dreamy look she knew was on her face. Esme was no fool. She steeled herself, adopting a placid countenance before turning to her maid.

"And now you're on some foolish mission to talk to a flower girl. And for what purpose?"

Esme, the elderly French maid who had been Joie's mother's maid, acted like a mother to Joie and never censured her opinion.

"Your father would not approve of this trip. You should be home resting for tonight's musicale."

“My father never approves of anything. Why would today be any different?”

Esme understood better than anyone how little her father had been involved in Joie’s life and, when he did pay attention, it was mainly because of her misdeeds. For a while, she had misbehaved to gain his notice, but she quickly tired of his long-winded lectures.

“Lieutenant Talley will not approve either.”

Esme was most likely correct about Reggie’s reaction. Joie had forgotten to tell him about Benning’s possible signal to the flower girl. She had become distracted by Reggie’s ardent declaration and then...her mind emptied of every thought except Reggie’s caresses. The way his voice darkened in desperation, his breathing strained and fast, and his lips burned her skin wherever they touched.

“My goodness. Just the mention of the lieutenant’s name and you look like you did when you were little and were convinced that you could see fairies. You were quite the imaginative child.”

Being reminded of the inventive childhood she created to fill her lonely days was not helpful at this moment. She wasn’t clear if she had seen the signal between Benning and the flower girl or not. She was torn about sending a message to Reggie about today’s venture.

Yesterday she had been distracted when she and Uncle Charles walked from the library. First, by Lord Sandow, who had importuned her, and then by Mr. Thornhill. Both requested to sit next to her at tonight’s musicale. She had tried to pay attention to Benning, but the gentlemen were quite ardent in their declarations of her beauty and what an honor it would be to sit next to her. Their words meant nothing. Reggie’s declaration of rather being shot at than watch her dance with other men was scorched into her soul.

She wanted badly to prove herself to Reggie. And if what she thought she’d seen wasn’t real, she didn’t want Reggie to think she was flighty. He had been impressed with her observations about Benning and confided in her. It was the first time he had spoken to her with respect for her insights into his case. It was a heady feeling, and she wanted to be of help in his important work.

“This will take a minute, and no one will know of this excursion. I just want to satisfy my curiosity.”

Esme moaned. "This is how it always starts."

"What possibly could go wrong? All I'm going to do is talk. I'll ask her a few questions, and we can be home in plenty of time to rest."

Joie walked toward the open area where benches and shade trees provided rest for the walkers. It was here where the flower girl had approached them yesterday.

"There she is." Joie spotted the pale-haired girl with her back to Joie from across the distance. Like yesterday, the girl had her curls tucked into a kerchief with a basket on her arm, maneuvering between the strollers to sell her wares.

Excitement skittered along Joie's nerves. This girl could be such a help in finding the spies.

"Mademoiselle? Please a word." Joie spoke in French to test whether the girl was French and part of the spy ring.

The girl continued on, unaware of Joie.

"If that street urchin is French, I'll eat her flowers."

Used to ignoring Esme's usual acerbic commentary, Joie continued to follow the girl.

"Miss. Please. I would like to buy your flowers."

Joie had shillings in her coin purse. She planned to bribe the girl with a hefty sum.

The girl turned at the mention of a sale. It wasn't the same girl. This girl was a mere gangly child, not more than eight or nine years old. Her dress was dirty and torn, her boots tattered, and her face smudged with coal dust.

Joie's shock at seeing such a wee one destitute twisted her insides. The knowledge that a child was working to feed others in her family outraged her. No child should go hungry.

"I'm looking for the girl who was here yesterday selling flowers. Maybe she was your older sister?" Yesterday's girl was in her teens, cleaner, and in finer clothes.

The youngster's blank look was far too weary for someone her age. "I'm to tell anyone who comes asking that he won."

"He won? How?"

"He said that whoever came would understand the message that no one can stop him."

But Joie didn't understand. She searched the area for any sign that he was near. Was "he" Benning? Or the head of the spy ring?

“Who, dear, told you?” Joie bent to the girl, keeping her voice pleasant.

The girl shifted the basket from one arm to the other. “Do you want to buy my flowers or not?”

“Of course, I’ll buy your whole basket.” Joie dug into her purse. “But please tell me, who is he? Is he watching?”

The girl handed Joie the bunches of flowers. “I don’t know nothing else.”

Joie gave the child all of the shillings. She ignored Esme’s gasp. Hopefully, the child would be able to keep the money.

The girl stared at the coins and then looked at Joie suspiciously.

“Can you tell me anything about the man who gave you the message?”

The girl placed the coins into a handkerchief that she knotted before placing it in her boot. “He’ll hurt my sister if I tell you anything.”

“You run along and don’t give your money to anyone. Do you understand?” Joie considered the idea of following the child, but she couldn’t risk the child or her sister’s well-being. What evil monster would use a child in such a sinister way? Now, she wanted to catch him and make him pay for his cruelty.

The child nodded and walked away.

“This is important,” Joie spoke over her shoulder to Esme as they rushed toward the entrance. “I must get a message to Reggie right away.”

And as if by magic, Reggie appeared. With a terrible glower, he stormed toward her, his long angry strides crossing the distance. How had he known she was here? Had he followed her?

“Reggie!” She hurried toward him despite his furious frown. He would never hurt her. “Oh, Reggie, that poor child. He told her that he would hurt her sister if she told me anything.”

His eyes were glacial as he crossed his arms over his chest. Nothing remained of yesterday’s ardent lover.

“How did you know that I would be here?”

“I didn’t. My men and I are here to follow the flower girl. We had hoped to have her lead us to Benning’s handler.”

No wonder he was angry. She had interfered with his plan to find the spy ring.

“What else did you learn?” His tone remained severe.

"That isn't the girl from yesterday. She said if anyone asked her about yesterday's girl, she was to say that he had won."

Reggie's harsh tone whipped across her. "Repeat the message."

Joie swallowed hard. She could barely get the words out with the ferocious look on his face and his clipped, impatient tone. "She was to say that he won. And that anyone asking would understand. Does that make sense to you?"

Reggie thundered to the men behind him, "Peters, where is Lady Henrietta right now?"

"She was on her way to the Abchurch offices to see his lordship when we left for the park. She wanted to see her husband after Dr. Linley's visit."

"And who accompanied her?"

"Lewis. And I'm not sure if he took other men."

"Did her ladyship take a carriage?"

"No, she wanted to walk. She said it was a fine day, and she had a lot to think about."

"I don't understand, Reggie. Why are you concerned about Lady Henrietta?" And then Joie grasped the situation. Benning was going after her ladyship.

"The message means that Benning knows we are onto him, and Lady Henrietta is in danger. I must find her before Benning does."

"I want to help."

"You can help by going to Rathbourne House and remaining there. I can't be worried about you right now."

"Why would you worry about me? Benning doesn't want me."

"No, but right now, the girl is reporting to the spymaster, or he has other people in the park watching. He will want to know who you are and why you were inquiring about the girl. If he doesn't already know your identity. You've placed yourself in danger."

He didn't say it, but by the way his eyebrows were pinched together and his jaw stiff, he might as well have added, "Again."

"Peters, take Miss James and her maid to Rathbourne House. Make sure no one follows you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll be safe with Peters." Reggie grabbed her, pulled her

into his arms, and kissed her fiercely for anyone to see. His warm breath moved against her lips. "Don't you dare get hurt. Promise me."

"I promise. But you have to promise me you won't get injured either."

Joie's knees were weak, and she almost stumbled when he stepped away.

"Stay at Rathbourne House until I return with Lady Henrietta."

He signaled, and three men emerged from the bushes. With the men following, he ran down the path toward Buckingham Palace and Westminster.

Chapter Nine

Reggie sprinted toward the exit from Hyde Park. His mind raced through the possible scenarios if the French captured Lady Henrietta. They would start with questioning her, and then, if her ladyship didn't give up England's secrets, torture would follow. Their goal would be to gain information about her work and then about her husband's. Lady Henrietta was doubly valuable to the French. Would they try to take her to France and use her as a bargaining chip? Or kill her after they extracted the information to bring down her devastated husband, the head of intelligence? Losing either would be a significant blow against England.

Reggie couldn't allow himself to consider any outcome other than he would arrive in time to rescue her. And he had to trust that Lewis would protect her with his life.

His training took over as he cleared his mind. His breathing evened as he pushed his body harder. His mind sharpened, his muscles tightened, and his heart rate slowed. Like a spark to kindle, his body ignited in battle mode.

He heard the footfalls of his soldiers behind him, the sound of birdsong. He was aware of the blossoming flowers, the shouts of children, and the laughter. In this state of heightened awareness, his mind was attuned to every sound and sight.

Reggie estimated that Lady Henrietta's walk, hindered by her gown and her small footsteps, would take at least thirty minutes. The rescue party might be able to catch up with Lady Henrietta and Lewis. An attack in the park on such a busy day would be difficult, attracting a lot of attention. And despite her ladyship's mild manner, he knew that Lord Rathbourne had trained her to scream and fight back.

Reggie had less than a quarter mile to reach the new Abchurch offices. Lord Rathbourne had moved the intelligence service closer to the palace, Westminster, and his estate for expediency in sharing intelligence during wartime.

He picked up the pace, dodging the strollers. Both Reggie's and Lewis's great heights were an advantage if Lewis was still in the park. Reggie would be able to spot the Welsh soldier amidst the throng.

He and his men were attracting a lot of interest. There was nothing covert about their dash through Hyde Park. He led the men off the main path to a side path, following the route that her ladyship would most likely take. The path narrowed, with fewer people enjoying the weather. This stretch gave the French an opportunity to strike.

His heart and lungs were pumping in rhythm with his feet. No sighting of Lady Henrietta or Lewis.

If Reggie's instincts were correct, Benning was using the change in Lady Henrietta's routine to his benefit. The doctor's visit followed by the unexpected trip to see her husband gave him the chance to act. Lady Henrietta was healthy and never had visits with her doctor. Reggie would wager her ladyship was enceinte and eager to share her exciting news with her husband.

Another reason to ensure that her ladyship wasn't harmed.

Benning had grown suspicious, most likely over the close scrutiny of his actions. With his cover discovered, he had nothing to lose, and the French had a lot to gain. And Joie had been correct. Benning was arrogant. Taunting his enemies was not the response of a trained covert operator but of an egotistical and desperate man.

The trees thinned, and Reggie could smell the horse manure and the sound of hawkers and wagon wheels creaking. He ran into Knightsbridge Street, looking both ways for Lady Henrietta.

Lewis's head protruded above the people walking toward Hyde Park Corner. Reggie couldn't see Lady Henrietta because of her small stature and the crush.

Reggie raced, shoving bystanders out of the way to get to Lewis. He considered shouting, but he didn't want to draw Lewis's attention from her ladyship or to alert Benning.

The crowd moved forward to cross the busy thoroughfare of Knightsbridge. Reggie watched Lewis's head swivel to look behind him. Had he spotted Benning?

Reggie scanned the throng going about their business on a fine spring day. He didn't see Benning or anyone else who looked out of place.

To reach the safety of Abchurch, Lady Henrietta just needed to cross the street and walk fifteen paces.

As the crowd thinned, Reggie glimpsed Lady Henrietta. Lewis had placed himself in the line of fire, walking in front, clearing a path to cross the busy road.

Reggie was five yards behind them. He pushed his way past two older women.

“I beg your pardon.”

He was almost in touching distance when he heard a coach barreling down Knightsbridge.

Lewis turned to grab Lady Henrietta’s hand to pull her to safety, but she had been shoved from behind as people scrambled to escape the path of the coach. She stumbled and fell to the ground.

Benning was at the reins and was headed straight toward Lady Henrietta. Reggie dove in front of the coach to grab her, his shoulder hitting the road before he rolled with her out of the path of the oncoming vehicle. Reggie covered her with his body. The ground vibrated, and the thunderous sound of hooves reverberated in his ears. Reggie’s hair lifted with the whoosh of air as the coach careened past them. The driver tried to regain control, but the coach pitched sideways before it rolled onto two wheels and crashed on its side.

Reggie’s men rushed to the coach as Reggie lifted himself off her ladyship. Lady Henrietta was covered in dirt. He had knocked off her bonnet, which lay crumpled on the ground. Her hair hung over one eye.

“Was the coach purposefully trying to hit me?”

Reggie was about to check Lady Henrietta over before letting her rise when Lord Rathbourne came barreling toward them, shouting. “Henrietta, my God, Henrietta. Someone get a doctor.”

Lord Rathbourne lifted his wife and pressed her against his chest. His eyes were glassy. Was it possible that the rock of England’s intelligence had tears in his eyes?

“Cord, I’m fine. Dirty and shaken up, but I truly am not injured. Talley saved me.”

“Thank you.” Lord Rathbourne’s voice cracked. “I will never be able to repay you.”

Talley felt heat spreading up his neck to his ears. “It isn’t necessary, my lord. It’s my job.”

“Not everyone can perform their job as you have done today.”

“Thank you, sir.” Reggie bowed his head before stepping away from the couple to allow them privacy.

Lord Rathbourne carried his wife to the office. Reggie could hear snippets of their conversation.

“Why did you come to the office without telling me?”

Lady Henrietta touched her husband’s face. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“My God, you did. I’m never allowing you to leave Rathbourne House ever again.”

The cool and collected Lord Rathbourne was bellowing. Reggie could hear her ladyship’s giggle.

And Reggie could sympathize with his lordship, thinking of Joie seeking out the flower girl. He, too, wanted to keep her secure in his house so that she would never take any risks. Husbands of intelligent and daring wives would always be flummoxed, challenged, and blissfully happy.

Epilogue

Joie smoothed the skirts of her blush ballgown instead of whirling like a demented dervish. She had the greatest urge to spin and twirl, to hear the swish of the delicate fabric moving around her legs. To dance into the moonlight with Reggie.

The exquisite gown amplified the perfect dreamlike evening. The silk gown with its elegant embroidery of roses and green leaves intertwined on the hem was the most beautiful garment she had ever seen.

Joy and happiness bubbled close to the surface. The two men that she loved most stood on each side of her in the receiving line of her betrothal ball—something she had hoped and prayed for but had never dared to envision.

The evening was a crush and, thankfully, without a hint of scandal or mention that Lord Ayer had accidentally fallen into the Serpentine when he bent to recover Joie's dropped glove. The memory of Lord Ayer screaming like a child would warm her heart for years to come. The entire ton was drawn to the ball, not by her scandalous behavior but by the mystery surrounding her fiancé.

She gazed up at Reggie, attired in his full regimental uniform, his Knight of Commander medal pinned to his chest next to the others citing his bravery. His hair was brushed back dramatically, with one lock falling over his brow. His strong profile with his angular jaw and sculpted cheekbones made him a strikingly handsome man. Beyond his masculine beauty, she loved him for his strength of character, dedication to country, and his skillful kisses. She admitted that the last quality might be a bit shallow but, from her limited experience, it was vital for marriage.

"I wish your mother was here to see your success and your brilliant match." Her father's eyes weren't shuttered like usual but instead shone with pride. "I've fulfilled my promise to your mother that you would be the belle of the season."

Joie squeezed her father's arm. "I wish she could be here too. She would be happy that we are together."

After witnessing Lord Rathbourne's reaction to his wife nearly being run over by Benning, Joie had new insight into both her father and Reggie.

The silent and contained lord had a look of terror on his face as he carried his wife into Rathbourne House, shouting for servants and doctors. How devastated her father must have been that he also had no control when her mother died from a fever.

The only way men could ignore their feelings of vulnerability was to be overprotective. Women felt the same powerlessness. Loving someone so deeply that you would rather die yourself was not easy and not for the fainthearted. But that devotion gave life its true meaning.

And her true meaning was to protect Reggie in any way she could.

With her new understanding, she had made a decision. Reggie's work was difficult and dangerous enough without her adding to his worry by involving herself in his assignments. She wanted to make his life easier. She loved him.

Joie listened to another lady congratulate Reggie on his knighthood. He thanked her with the same response that he had given every woman and man who had passed through the line. "Thank you for your wishes. Because of the war, my service to His Highness must remain undisclosed."

Lord Rathbourne must have realized that the secrecy would fuel the fire of the ton's insatiable appetite for gossip. Reggie's heroic act had to remain a secret. The outcry and fear of a French spy attacking a lady in the streets didn't instill confidence. Benning's death was explained away as a drunken accident, not a spy's futile attempt to kill Lady Henrietta and seek revenge when his cover had been blown. What no one knew was that Benning was alive and being held for questioning. Reggie hadn't given up his mission to find the tutor's connections to the spy ring and to make Benning and all his conspirators pay for their treason.

As if conjured by her thoughts on the covert work done to protect England, Lord Rathbourne arrived with Lady Henrietta on his arm. Her ladyship looked stunning in a simple high-waisted gown. Although the forest-green gown was unremarkable, Lady Henrietta looked beautiful. Her face glowed, and the mossy color of the dress intensified the green in her sparkling eyes.

"I hear your knighthood has made quite a stir. And I expect from the attendance at tonight's event, everyone wants the real news," Lord Rathbourne said.

Joie felt Reggie stiffen, his jaw jutting out in his stubborn

way.

"I hope that the success of the ball is due to the goodness and beauty of my fiancée."

"Nicely said." Lord Rathbourne nodded to Joie. "Talley is right in reminding me of my manners. May I wish you all the happiness in the world on your betrothal. And if all of your dances are not spoken for, it would be my pleasure to partner you."

"Thank you, my lord." Joie curtsied when she wanted to embrace him. Now *that* would cause a scandal.

Lord Rathbourne had recommended Reggie for knighthood, ensuring him a title, and thus gaining her father's acceptance of the betrothal. Lord Rathbourne was very grateful to Reggie for saving his wife's life, but Joie guessed that his recommendation to the king was partially because he wanted to please his wife. How could Joie not care about this man?

"Your Grace," Lord Rathbourne acknowledged her father, who was more than a bit miffed that even with his powerful stature, he wasn't privy to the reason Reggie was knighted.

Lady Henrietta's eyes traveled over Joie as she curtsied to her ladyship. "You do look lovely, Miss James. I hear that your dress was designed by my dear friend."

"Lady Brinsley was adamant on having a say in the design. We cannot thank you enough for all that you and Lord Rathbourne have done for us."

"My wife and I will always remain in the lieutenant's debt."

Lady Henrietta smiled graciously. "Your Grace, I've heard that your protégé is also engaged to be married."

"Yes, it pleases me that Landry has made a sound match like my daughter."

Albert immediately chose a bishop's daughter when he learned of Joie and Reggie's engagement. Joie felt badly for the poor woman, who must have been second on his list since she wasn't the daughter of an archbishop.

"This has worked out splendidly for all parties involved." Lady Henrietta's eyes were lit with mischief, knowing darn well that she had outmaneuvered Joie's father.

"Indeed," her father grumbled. He might be softening toward Joie and Reggie's marriage, but he would never be generous in defeat.

Lord Rathbourne led his wife into the ballroom.

“Come along, my dear. I see that Aunt Euphemia has arrived and is engaged rather forcefully with Jenkinson, the Home Secretary.”

Joie could hear the orchestra warming up its instruments.

“Miss James.” Reggie offered his arm. “May I escort you into the ballroom?”

The huskiness in Reggie’s voice was palpable on her skin, heightening her awareness of his heat and masculine scent of smoke and sandalwood. Finally, she would publicly claim Reggie as her own. How shortsighted of men to think they were the only ones who felt possessive. Joie hadn’t missed the open appraisal of Reggie by the ladies as they were presented. She watched them drop their eyes and flutter their fans to attract attention to their well-endowed bosoms. And she made a note of which ones she’d be sure to keep from Reggie’s notice.

“I would be most delighted.”

Joie surprised her father by hugging him before taking Reggie’s arm. He stiffened in response to her sudden lunge and then patted her on the shoulder.

“I’m so happy, Father. Thank you.”

Reggie led her through the crowded ballroom. He refused to stop to speak to anyone but settled them into a private alcove to wait for the music to begin.

“Reggie, it is rude not to mingle and chat with our guests.”

He grinned at her, his full lips curving into a downright devilish grin. “Is that so? Well, hang our guests. All they want to know about is my knighthood. I’ve had to watch you dance with other men for over a month; tonight you’ll dance only with me. And, of course, Lord Rathbourne. But no other man.”

“Reggie, it will cause a scandal.”

“No, what is going to cause a scandal is later when I take you out into the garden and don’t return.”

Joie felt the blush rise in her face, and her heart leapt at the way his voice pitched deeper with his promise.

“You can do no wrong with Lady Henrietta and Aunt Euphemia as your patrons. There will be no scandal. We’re given leeway now that we’re a betrothed couple. And now that Lady Henrietta has asked you to contribute your knowledge of Latin and Greek to the code breakers, you need never worry about causing a scandal.”

"I would never want to embarrass either of the ladies, especially after all they've done for us. And I won't have my father embarrassed when we're finally finding a way to mend all the hurt."

Reggie hadn't stopped grinning. "So no rendezvous in the garden?"

"I've declined Lady Henrietta's offer. I don't believe she will ever need my assistance. I think she was trying to help me again. From my recent visits with Uncle Charles, I've surmised that the entire Harcourt family, but especially Henrietta, are brilliant linguists. I was a model student because I was trying to gain my father's approval, but it was never my passion."

"Is this your way of telling me that I'm your newest passion? I wholeheartedly support the change."

"You're incorrigible." She couldn't help but laugh. "I'd like to use part of my dowry to help the flower girls. I've never paid much attention to their plight, but I want to make sure that they have food and shelter."

"You know how to deflate a man's pride."

"Reggie, what has gotten into you?"

"I'm happy. I feel like the luckiest man in the world to have won a warm and loving woman. A woman who cares about street urchins and a lonely soldier who didn't know he was lonely until a black-haired minx came racing into his life. You are to be my wife. Does it not make you happy?"

"Deliciously, delightfully so."

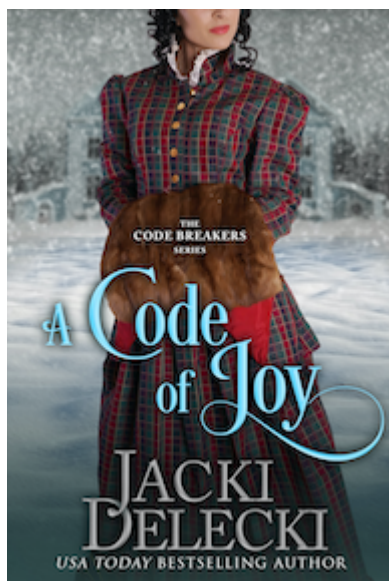
Reggie pulled her into his arms and kissed her. He took possession of her lips and her heart.

And Joie realized that in Reggie's arms, she didn't care one fig about the scandal.

The End

Excerpt from
A Code of Joy
The Code Breakers Regency Romantic Suspense Series

by Jacki Delecki



Miss Joie Louise James tightened the ribbons on her bonnet to thwart the high winds from blowing her favorite hat straight off. She trudged ahead of her maid and footman, dodging the potholes and muddy puddles. After the last few days, she was surprised by nothing, including the sudden deluge from a cloudburst that sent icy rain down her collar. Nothing in her life was proceeding as planned.

Unfair and unjust circumstances had forced her to leave London and her friends at Christmastime. With her head down, she pressed on toward the shining lights of the town. After all that had recently befallen her, she'd barely blinked when the carriage axle snapped in the midst of the winter storm. Disaster appeared to be following her...

How could this time of love and peace be filled with spite, gossip, and bounders who made it a game to ruin the reputations of

innocent women? She had looked so forward to the little season—the chance to meet new people, to develop friendships and the possibility of a *tendre* for an eligible gentleman. How could she know that Lord Ayer was less than eligible—in fact, was a scoundrel?

Her French maid trailed behind, reciting all of Joie's failings. She refused to allow Esme's criticism, or her damp pelisse chafing her neck, to sour her mood. Esme, whom she'd inherited after her mother's death, acted more like a mother than a maid. The wiry older woman didn't hold back her feelings that all of this was Joie's fault.

"All," meaning the carriage's broken axle, Joie's supposed fall from grace, her father's immediate insistence that Joie and Esme be sent to the small village of Lydd. Joie would be in the care of his maiden sister, who adhered to the same rigid rules as her older brother. If Esme started again on Joie's curiosity and gullibility as character flaws, Joie would scream. Who valued being cynical and untrusting?

Joie slowed her steps as the road narrowed into an uneven cobbled walkway. The inn was not far, and she wanted to run toward the beacon of light and escape the unrelenting rain. She kept her steps slow and steady since she didn't want to add falling on the slippery bricks to the growing list of calamities.

"The inn looks very jolly." The glow of candlelight shone through the misty fog. She refused to allow the awful circumstances to ruin Christmas. It was her favorite time of year, where everyone was in good cheer, possibly even her malcontent aunt. And then, Joie realized that she had been given a reprieve from spending the entire holiday with her aunt—a reprieve from Aunt Eleanor's stern countenance and her constant demands.

The storm had delayed their arrival in Lydd, a dismal town that sat on the Romney Marsh. The storm had also postponed her father's punishment that she suffer her Aunt Eleanor's company until the season resumed in London. Her father hadn't become such a curmudgeon until his wife had died five years ago. He'd gradually changed, growing intolerant—as he shouldn't be as a man of the cloth—of anyone's fall from grace, especially his daughter's.

With a sense of hope and determination, Joie realized she and Esme would have to stay in Rye at least for tonight—and possibly two or three nights, depending on the storm and the time

needed to repair her carriage. Instead of listening to her aunt's doleful sermons, she'd be mingling with strangers. Excitement thrummed through her.

For the next few days, she would be on her own, away from her father delivering homilies over her head, or from being at the beck and call of her exacting aunt. Instead, she was in the ancient town of Rye, known for danger and mystery as the center of French smuggling. She might catch glimpses of the smugglers who brought brandy and lace from France for English consumption.

The Mermaid Inn was carved into the wood sign making a thwacking sound each time a gust of wind sent it crashing against the building. The ivy-covered brick inn was two stories with paned windows shining with candlelight.

Frigid water dripped from her aubergine-and-green bonnet onto her face and neck. And from the way that the olive green plumes stuck to her forehead, her beloved bonnet must be ruined.

She and Esme had spent hours deciding on the exact shade of green for the ribbons, plumes, and berries. At least Esme didn't find fault with Joie's flair for fashion or love of dramatic colors. Joie had inherited her fashion style from her half-French *mère*.

Fredrick, her footman, darted ahead to open the door to the inn. Pine boughs hung by red ribbons from the overhead wood beams. A fire blazed in the gigantic brick fireplace, which was also covered in greens and pine. And the scent of cedar, pine, and cinnamon wafted in the air.

Stepping into the bright and cozy inn, she smiled broadly, eager to embark on an adventure. She had never stayed in an inn among strangers. She was ready to find holiday merriment among fellow travelers. Chairs were positioned around the fireplace where Joie would enjoy sitting and watching the guests' comings and goings.

After giving Esme her portmanteau, Joie crossed the room to dry in front of the fire. Fredrick would arrange for her and Esme's rooms and a private dining room. Her father would have conniptions at just the idea that she was residing at an inn. On their three-day journey, she had only stayed in the homes of distant relatives. He would never countenance her dining in a public room. But he could not interfere at this point.

A massive man with sandy brown hair, dressed in riding breeches and tall black Hessian boots, approached the fireplace

where Joie stood with her hands raised to the fire to warm herself. How had she not noticed him in the crowd of people lingering to avoid the rain? He stood a foot taller than everyone and exuded arrogant confidence, unlike the rest of the weary and sodden travelers.

From the way that his thick hair was slicked back and damp, he had also been caught in the storm. She expected when his hair was dry that it would be closer to blond, for the firelight caught glimmers of gold. His brows and eyelashes were dark, framing sea-blue eyes.

He hesitated before he took a position next to her. Not too close. She couldn't help but notice how the powerful muscles in his thighs flexed when he braced his foot on the fireplace's andirons. He must spend a great deal of time on horseback.

As expected of a lady, she didn't acknowledge him but lowered her eyes after delivering a small smile. She didn't know the etiquette rules when stranded in a storm or during an unplanned stay in an inn. It seemed remarkably unfriendly not to greet strangers.

Excerpt from
Mission: Impossible to Resist
The Impossible Mission Series

by Jacki Delecki



Jordan Dean couldn't catch a break. There was no escaping the unwanted and, more than likely uninvited, guests this evening. Now Morley Townsend was in the receiving line. Her sister would never have invited Jordan's ex, because Sophie knew exactly how Jordan felt about the possessive, self-absorbed millionaire. Morley was probably here as part of another of their father's elaborate realignments of the people he saw as chess pieces.

How could an evening dedicated to global peace end up seething with such hostility, resentment, and homicidal urges? And she'd only been here about twenty minutes.

Jordan pivoted—intent on escaping to the balcony before Morley spotted her—and walked straight into a very big, very solid, very muscular wall. The sudden impact set her wobbling. The way this evening was going, she should have stayed in her flats.

The solid, muscular wall grabbed her elbows with hot, rough

hands and held on until she was steadier.

“Running from a fight?” His voice was polished, smooth, and smoky, like the fifty-year-old Scottish single malt whisky Morley liked to go on about ad nauseam.

Jordan looked up...and up...into penetrating aquamarine eyes. A darker blue circle rimmed each iris, like a ring around an outer planet.

“Fight?” Her voice came out high-pitched and strangled.

He leaned closer and confided as an aside, as if they were well-acquainted, “First the itsy woman you nailed with your shoe. I was hoping to see more. And now, from the way you’re high-tailing it away from the door, I’d say you’re avoiding Mr. Zippity Slick...” He tipped his head toward her ex.

She twisted around to see Morley run his hand over his perfect hair, held in place by his designer clay pomade.

“Zippity Slick?” She could barely contain an unladylike snort, and the simultaneous urge to burst into hysterical giggles. Not the image Morley was aiming for with his pricey hair product.

Her muscular wall grinned, softening the razor-sharp angles of his cheekbones and making his light eyes even lighter. “An angry ex?”

Jordan’s mind raced, trying to keep up with their off-kilter exchange. This was the strangest conversation she could ever remember having, made more distracting because here was a man who easily put Chris Hemsworth to shame, with his shredded body and *blue-flame-of-intensity* eyes surrounded by inky black lashes.

What he was he playing at?

“Nailed it, didn’t I?” His warm, minty breath brushed against her cheek when he chuckled.

Jordan stared up into the enormous man’s piercing eyes, practically baking in his heat and virility. “Let go of me, or I’ll call over my bodyguard.” She hated that her voice came out puny and tinny.

He waited a second too long to release her arms, then moved in close, too close, further invading her private space. “You’ve got to be kidding.” He crossed his arms and grinned, his eyes alight with amusement and a challenge. “Go ahead. Call him.”

She quickly scanned the hall, looking for Harry and the crew who guarded her and her sister 24/7.

“Your bodyguard is sick. And you haven’t noticed that he

isn't here, have you?"

Her heart kicked into tachycardia speeding out of control.
"Harry is sick?"

"Not Harry...Pete, the man who regularly guards you. You didn't notice, did you?"

Jordan searched for Pete, a middle-aged, retired policeman who was a regular member of her security detail. He hadn't been at his post, which this evening was at the door downstairs, vetting everyone who entered the building.

Relief surged through her when she spotted Harry, who was standing by the door wearing his rumpled navy blue suit and the burgundy Armani tie she gave him for his birthday.

Mr. Mountain shook his head. "Unbelievable. You have absolutely no situational awareness."

"Shows how much you know." Situational awareness. She had it in spades—no, in sharp-edged diamonds. She was hyper-aware of Sophie's discomfort when greeting Rob Boyer, an associate of their father's and married man who had been hitting on Sophie since she was sixteen...and of Laura Stuliley cornering Sarah Sorenson's husband...and the tension between the elderly Dr. Levin and his hottie young bride.

Jordan wanted to defend herself, but she had a feeling he wouldn't be impressed.

And she had noticed Pete was absent from the downstairs entrance earlier. But, honestly, how much risk could there be while socializing in a private room, in a private club, guarded by her family's private security firm?

And who the hell was this man to criticize her...situational awareness...anyway?

"Who are you? I know you weren't invited tonight."

"Stand out, do I?" The edge was back in his voice, his granite jaw getting tighter with every word.

Interesting. Mr. Chiseled was sensitive?

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About the Author



Jacki Delecki is a *USA Today* bestselling romantic suspense author whose stories are filled with heart-pounding adventure, danger, intrigue, and romance.

Her books have consistently received rave reviews for her three bestselling suspense series: Contemporary romantic suspense **The Impossible Mission Series**, featuring Special Force Operatives; **The Grayce Walters Series**, contemporary romantic suspense following a Seattle animal acupuncturist with a nose for crime; and **The Code Breakers Series**, Regency suspense set against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars.

Jacki's stories reflect her lifelong love affair with the arts and history. When not writing, she volunteers for Seattle's Ballet and Opera Companies, and leads children's tours of Pike Street Market.

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